

THE MAGAZINE OF

**Fantasy and
Science Fiction**

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AUGUST



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in this issue **NEW**

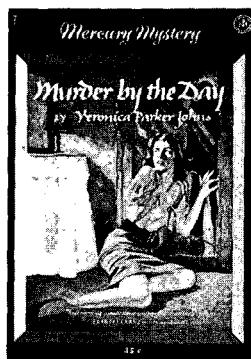
ALFRED BESTER

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The killer's first victim burned to death in a fire- proof chair...

Then Webster Flagg investigated. Trusted by all the suspects, this gentleman by night and houseman by day used his unique position to pry and probe and dig. And he made some startling discoveries about a man who turned out to be a woman; cigarettes that contained more than tobacco; and a swindle that began with an old man's vanity and turned a young woman's boudoir into a chamber of death...

A rare and wry delight for mystery fans, this Anthony Boucher selection "Murder by the Day," is in the great tradition of the amateur sleuth. Author Veronica Parker Johns, with three fine mystery novels and several excellent short stories behind her, has now created in Webster Flagg a humorous, unorthodox detective. Once again, with the delicacy and finesse that is so much a part of both herself and her writing, Miss Johns has dramatically portrayed the tangled fortunes of a group of sophisticated people mixed up in murder.



With an introduction by Anthony Boucher

"Murder by the Day," by Veronica Parker Johns
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Mercury Publications 570 Lexington Avenue N. Y. C.

THE MAGAZINE OF

Fantasy and Science Fiction

VOLUME 7, No. 2

AUGUST

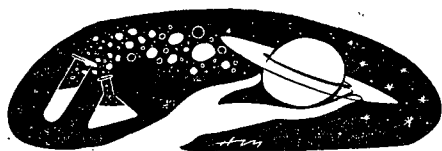
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The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction, Volume 7, No. 2, Whole No. 39, August, 1954. Published monthly by Fantasy House, Inc., at 35¢ a copy. Annual subscription, \$4.00 in U. S. and Possessions; \$5.00 in all other countries. Publication office, Concord, N. H. General offices, 570 Lexington Avenue, New York 22, N. Y. Editorial office, 2643 Dana St., Berkeley 4, Calif. Entered as second class matter at the Post Office at Concord, N. H., under the Act of March 3, 1879. Printed in U. S. A. Copyright, 1954, by Fantasy House, Inc. All rights, including translation into other languages, reserved. Submissions must be accompanied by stamped, self-addressed envelopes; the Publisher assumes no responsibility for return of unsolicited manuscripts.

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FANTASY and SCIENCE FICTION

471 Park Avenue

New York 22, N. Y.

Last year, when Alfred Bester published his first book outside of the science fiction field, WHO HE? (Dial), he urgently begged us not to refer to it as a mystery story. But from a purely formal viewpoint, that's exactly what it was; and Mr. Bester was simply following in the tradition of Sophocles, Shakespeare and Dostoyevsky by using the tale of mystery, violence and suspense as a framework for what he wanted to express concerning character and society. This use of mystery and crime as the storytelling structure for a complex expression has also marked much of Bester's science fiction, as you know from THE DEMOLISHED MAN and from such F&SF stories as Star Light, Star Bright or Time Is the Traitor; and here is yet another study, at once vigorous and subtle, in the mystery of murder — and of character — in the remote future . . . to which the author adds a striking literary experiment which we think you'll find as fascinating as any of the celebrated technical devices in THE DEMOLISHED MAN, and more psychologically significant.

Fondly Fahrenheit

by ALFRED BESTER

ILLUSTRATIONS BY NICK SOLOVIOFF

HE DOESN'T KNOW which of us I am these days, but they know one truth. You must own nothing but yourself. You must make your own life, live your own life and die your own death . . . or else you will die another's.

The rice fields on Paragon III stretch for hundreds of miles like checkerboard tundras, a blue and brown mosaic under a burning sky of orange. In the evening, clouds whip like smoke, and the paddies rustle and murmur.

A long line of men marched across the paddies the evening we escaped from Paragon III. They were silent, armed, intent; a long rank of silhouetted statues looming against the smoking sky. Each man carried a gun. Each man wore a walkie-talkie belt pack, the speaker button in his ear, the microphone bug clipped to his throat, the glowing view-screen strapped to his wrist like a green-eyed watch. The multitude of screens showed nothing but a multitude of individual paths through the paddies. The annunciators uttered no sound but the rustle and splash of steps. The men spoke infrequently, in heavy grunts, all speaking to all.

"Nothing here."

"Where's here?"

"Jenson's fields."

"You're drifting too far west."

"Close in the line there."

"Anybody covered the Grimson paddy?"

"Yeah. Nothing."

"She couldn't have walked this far."

"Could have been carried."

"Think she's alive?"

"Why should she be dead?"

The slow refrain swept up and down the long line of beaters advancing toward the smoky sunset. The line of beaters wavered like a writhing snake, but never ceased its remorseless advance. One hundred men spaced 50 feet apart. Five thousand feet of ominous search. One mile of angry determination stretching from east to west across a compass of heat. Evening fell. Each man lit his search lamp. The writhing snake was transformed into a necklace of wavering diamonds.

"Clear here. Nothing."

"Nothing here."

"Nothing."

"What about the Allen paddies?"

"Covering them now."

"Think we missed her?"

"Maybe."

"We'll beat back and check."

"This'll be an all night job."

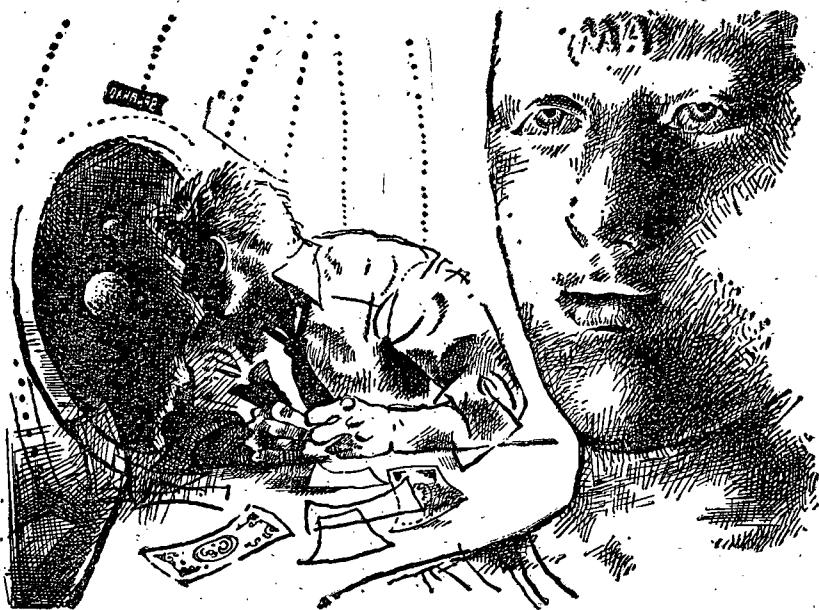
"Allen paddies clear."

"God damn! We've got to find her!"

"We'll find her."

"Here she is. Sector seven. Tune in."

The line stopped. The diamonds froze in the heat. There was silence. Each man gazed into the glowing green screen on his wrist, tuning to sector seven. All tuned to one. All showed a small nude figure awash in the muddy water of a paddy. Alongside the figure an owner's stake of bronze read: VANDALEUR. The ends of the line converged toward the Vandaleur field. The necklace turned into a cluster of stars. One hundred men gathered around a small nude body, a child dead in a rice paddy. There was no water in her mouth. There were fingermarks on her throat. Her innocent face was battered. Her body was torn. Clotted blood on her skin was crusted and hard.



"Dead three-four hours at least."

"Her mouth is dry."

"She wasn't drowned. Beaten to death."

In the dark evening heat the men swore softly. They picked up the body. One stopped the others and pointed to the child's fingernails. She had fought her murderer. Under the nails were particles of flesh and bright drops of scarlet blood, still liquid, still uncoagulated.

"That blood ought to be clotted too."

"Funny."

"Not so funny. What kind of blood don't clot?"

"Android."

"Looks like she was killed by one."

"Vandaleur owns an android."

"She couldn't be killed by an android."

"That's android blood under her nails."

"The police better check."

"The police'll prove I'm right."

"But androids can't kill."

"That's android blood, ain't it?"

"Androids can't kill. They're made that way."

"Looks like one android was made wrong."

"Jesus!"

And the thermometer that day registered 92.9° gloriously Fahrenheit.

So there we were aboard the Paragon Queen enroute for Megaster V; James Vandaleur and his android. James Vandaleur counted his money and wept. In the second class cabin with him was his android, a magnificent synthetic creature with classic features and wide blue eyes. Raised on its forehead in a cameo of flesh were the letters MA, indicating that this was one of the rare multiple aptitude androids, worth \$57,000 on the current exchange. There we were, weeping and counting and calmly watching.

"Twelve, fourteen, sixteen. Sixteen hundred dollars," Vandaleur wept. "That's all. Sixteen hundred dollars. My house was worth ten thousand. The land was worth five. There was furniture, cars, my paintings, etchings, my plane, my — And nothing to show for everything but sixteen hundred dollars. Christ!"

I leaped up from the table and turned on the android. I pulled a strap from one of the leather bags and beat the android. It didn't move.

"I must remind you," the android said, "that I am worth fifty-seven thousand dollars on the current exchange. I must warn you that you are endangering valuable property."

"You damned crazy machine," Vandaleur shouted.

"I am not a machine," the android answered. "The robot is a machine. The android is a chemical creation of synthetic tissue."

"What got into you?" Vandaleur cried. "Why did you do it? Damn you!" He beat the android savagely.

"I must remind you that I cannot be punished," I said. "The pleasure-pain syndrome is not incorporated in the android synthesis."

"Then why did you kill her?" Vandaleur shouted. "If it wasn't for kicks, why did you —"

"I must remind you," the android said, "that the second class cabins in these ships are not soundproofed."

Vandaleur dropped the strap and stood panting, staring at the creature he owned.

"Why did you do it? Why did you kill her?" I asked.

"I don't know," I answered.

"First it was malicious mischief. Small things. Petty destruction. I should have known there was something wrong with you then. Androids can't destroy. They can't harm. They —"

"There is no pleasure-pain syndrome incorporated in the android synthesis."

"Then it got to arson. Then serious destruction. Then assault . . . that engineer on Rigel. Each time worse. Each time we had to get out faster. Now it's murder. Christ! What's the matter with you? What's happened?"

"There are no self-check relays incorporated in the android brain."

"Each time we had to get out it was a step downhill. Look at me. In a second class cabin. Mè. James Paleologue Vandaleur. There was a time when my father was the wealthiest — Now, sixteen hundred dollars in the world. That's all I've got. And you. Christ damn you!"

Vandaleur raised the strap to beat the android again, then dropped it and collapsed on a berth, sobbing. At last he pulled himself together.

"Instructions," he said.

The multiple aptitude android responded at once. It arose and awaited orders.

"My name is now Valentine. James Valentine. I stopped off on Paragon III for only one day to transfer to this ship for Megaster V. My occupation: Agent for one privately owned MA android which is for hire. Purpose of visit: To settle on Megaster V. Fix the papers."

The android removed Vandaleur's passport and papers from a bag, got pen and ink and sat down at the table. With an accurate, flawless hand — an accomplished hand that could draw, write, paint, carve, engrave, etch, photograph, design, create and build — it meticulously forged new credentials for Vandaleur. Its owner watched me miserably.

"Create and build," I muttered. "And now destroy. Oh God! What am I going to do? Christ! If I could only get rid of you. If I didn't have to live off you. God! If only I'd inherited some guts instead of you."

Dallas Brady was Megaster's leading jewelry designer. She was short, stocky, amoral and a nymphomaniac. She hired Vandaleur's multiple aptitude android and put me to work in her shop. She seduced Vandaleur. In her bed one night, she asked abruptly: "Your name's Vandaleur, isn't it?"

"Yes," I murmured. Then: "No! No! It's Valentine. James Valentine."

"What happened on Paragon?" Dallas Brady asked. "I thought androids couldn't kill or destroy property. Prime Directives and Inhibitions set up for them when they're synthesized. Every company guarantees they can't."

"Valentine!" Vandaleur insisted.

"Oh come off it," Dallas Brady said. "I've known for a week. I haven't hollered copper, have I?"

"The name is Valentine."

"You want to prove it? You want I should call the cops?" Dallas reached out and picked up the phone.

"For God's sake, Dallas!" Vandaleur leaped up and struggled to take

the phone from her. She fended him off, laughing at him, until he collapsed and wept in shame and helplessness.

"How did you find out?" he asked at last.

"The papers are full of it. And Valentine was a little too close to Vandaleur. That wasn't smart, was it?"

"I guess not. I'm not very smart."

"Your android's got quite a record, hasn't it? Assault. Arson. Destruction. What happened on Paragon?"

"It kidnaped a child. Took her out into the rice fields and murdered her."

"Raped her?"

"I don't know."

"They're going to catch up with you."

"Don't I know it? Christ! We've been running for two years now. Seven planets in two years. I must have abandoned fifty thousand dollars worth of property in two years."

"You better find out what's wrong with it."

"How can I? Can I walk into a repair clinic and ask for an overhaul? What am I going to say? 'My android's just turned killer. Fix it.' They'd call the police right off." I began to shake. "They'd have that android dismantled inside one day. I'd probably be booked as accessory to murder."

"Why didn't you have it repaired before it got to murder?"

"I couldn't take the chance," Vandaleur explained angrily. "If they started fooling around with lobotomies and body chemistry and endocrine surgery, they might have destroyed its aptitudes. What would I have left to hire out? How would I live?"

"You could work yourself. People do."

"Work at what? You know I'm good for nothing. How could I compete with specialist androids and robots? Who can, unless he's got a terrific talent for a particular job?"

"Yeah. That's true."

"I lived off my old man all my life. Damn him! He had to go bust just before he died. Left me the android and that's all. The only way I can get along is living off what it earns."

"You better sell it before the cops catch up with you. You can live off fifty grand. Invest it."

"At 3 per cent? Fifteen hundred a year? When the android returns 15 per cent on its value? Eight thousand a year. That's what it earns. No, Dallas. I've got to go along with it."

"What are you going to do about its violence kick?"

"I can't do anything . . . except watch it and pray. What are you going to do about it?"

"Nothing. It's none of my business. Only one thing . . . I ought to get something for keeping my mouth shut."

"What?"

"The android works for me for free. Let somebody else pay you, but I get it for free."

The multiple aptitude android worked. Vandaleur collected its fees. His expenses were taken care of. His savings began to mount. As the warm spring of Megaster V turned to hot summer, I began investigating farms and properties. It would be possible, within a year or two, for us to settle down permanently, provided Dallas Brady's demands did not become rapacious.

On the first hot day of summer, the android began singing in Dallas Brady's workshop. It hovered over the electric furnace which, along with the weather, was broiling the shop, and sang an ancient tune that had been popular half a century before.

*Oh, it's no feat to beat the heat.
All reet! All reet!
So jeet your seat
Be fleet be fleet
Cool and discreet
Honey . . .*

It sang in a strange, halting voice, and its accomplished fingers were clasped behind its back, writhing in a strange rumba all their own. Dallas Brady was surprised.

"You happy or something?" she asked.

"I must remind you that the pleasure-pain syndrome is not incorporated in the android synthesis," I answered. "All reet! All reet! Be fleet be fleet, cool and discreet, honey . . ."

Its fingers stopped their writhing and picked up a heavy pair of iron tongs. The android poked them into the glowing heart of the furnace, leaning far forward to peer into the lovely heat.

"Be careful, you damned fool!" Dallas Brady exclaimed. "You want to fall in?"

"I must remind you that I am worth fifty-seven thousand dollars on the current exchange," I said. "It is forbidden to endanger valuable property. All reet! All reet! Honey . . ."

It withdrew a crucible of glowing gold from the electric furnace, turned, capered hideously, sang crazily, and splashed a sluggish goblet of molten gold over Dallas Brady's head. She screamed and collapsed, her hair and

clothes flaming, her skin crackling. The android poured again while it capered and sang.

"Be fleet be fleet, cool and discreet, honey . . ." It sang and slowly poured and poured the molten gold. Then I left the workshop and rejoined James Vandaleur in his hotel suite. The android's charred clothes and squirming fingers warned its owner that something was very much wrong.

Vandaleur rushed to Dallas Brady's workshop, stared once, vomited and fled. I had enough time to pack one bag and raise nine hundred dollars on portable assets. He took a third class cabin on the Megaster Queen which left that morning for Lyra Alpha. He took me with him. He wept and counted his money and I beat the android again.

And the thermometer in Dallas Brady's workshop registered 98.1° beautifully Fahrenheit.

On Lyra Alpha we holed up in a small hotel near the university. There, Vandaleur carefully bruised my forehead until the letters MA were obliterated by the swelling and the discoloration. The letters would reappear again, but not for several months, and in the meantime Vandaleur hoped the hue and cry for an MA android would be forgotten. The android was hired out as a common laborer in the university power plant. Vandaleur, as James Venice, eked out life on the android's small earnings.

I wasn't too unhappy. Most of the other residents in the hotel were university students, equally hard-up, but delightfully young and enthusiastic. There was one charming girl with sharp eyes and a quick mind. Her name was Wanda, and she and her beau, Jed Stark, took a tremendous interest in the killing android which was being mentioned in every paper in the galaxy.

"We've been studying the case," she and Jed said at one of the casual student parties which happened to be held this night in Vandaleur's room. "We think we know what's causing it. We're going to do a paper." They were in a high state of excitement.

"Causing what?" somebody wanted to know.

"The android rampage."

"Obviously out of adjustment, isn't it? Body chemistry gone haywire. Maybe a kind of synthetic cancer, yes?"

"No." Wanda gave Jed a look of suppressed triumph.

"Well, what is it?"

"Something specific."

"What?"

"That would be telling."

"Oh come on."

"Nothing doing."

"Won't you tell us?" I asked intently. "I . . . We're very much interested in what could go wrong with an android."

"No, Mr. Venice," Wanda said. "It's a unique idea and we've got to protect it. One thesis like this and we'll be set up for life. We can't take the chance of somebody stealing it."

"Can't you give us a hint?"

"No. Not a hint. Don't say a word, Jed. But I'll tell you this much, Mr. Venice. I'd hate to be the man who owns that android."

"You mean the police?" I asked.

"I mean projection, Mr. Venice. Projection! That's the danger . . . and I won't say any more. I've said too much as is."

I heard steps outside, and a hoarse voice singing softly: "Be fleet be fleet cool and discreet, honey . . ." My android entered the room, home from its tour of duty at the university power plant. It was not introduced. I motioned to it and I immediately responded to the command and went to the beer keg and took over Vandaleur's job of serving the guests. Its accomplished fingers writhed in a private rumba of their own. Gradually they stopped their squirming, and the strange humming ended.

Androids were not unusual at the university. The wealthier students owned them along with cars and planes. Vandaleur's android provoked no comment, but young Wanda was sharp-eyed and quick-witted. She noted my bruised forehead and she was intent on the history-making thesis she and Jed Stark were going to write. After the party broke up, she consulted with Jed walking upstairs to her room.

"Jed, why'd that android have a bruised forehead?"

"Probably hurt itself, Wanda. It's working in the power plant. They fling a lot of heavy stuff around."

"That all?"

"What else?"

"It could be a convenient bruise."

"Convenient for what?"

"Hiding what's stamped on its forehead."

"No point to that, Wanda. You don't have to see marks on a forehead to recognize an android. You don't have to see a trademark on a car to know it's a car."

"I don't mean it's trying to pass as a human. I mean it's trying to pass as a lower grade android."

"Why?"

"Suppose it had MA on its forehead."

"Multiple aptitude? Then why in hell would Venice waste it stoking furnaces if it could earn more — Oh. Oh! You mean it's —?"

Wanda nodded.

"Jesus!" Stark pursed his lips. "What do we do? Call the police?"

"No. We don't know if it's an MA for a fact. If it turns out to be an MA and the killing android, our paper comes first anyway. This is our big chance, Jed. If it's *that* android we can run a series of controlled tests and —"

"How do we find out for sure?"

"Easy. Infrared film. That'll show what's under the bruise. Borrow a camera. Buy some film. We'll sneak down to the power plant tomorrow afternoon and take some pictures. Then we'll know."

They stole down into the university power plant the following afternoon. It was a vast cellar, deep under the earth. It was dark, shadowy, luminous with burning light from the furnace doors. Above the roar of the fires they could hear a strange voice shouting and chanting in the echoing vault: "All reet! All reet! So jeet your seat. Be fleet be fleet, cool and discreet, honey . . ." And they could see a capering figure dancing a lunatic rumba in time to the music it shouted. The legs twisted. The arms waved. The fingers writhed.

Jed Stark raised the camera and began shooting his spool of infrared film, aiming the camera sights at that bobbing head. Then Wanda shrieked, for I saw them and came charging down on them, brandishing a polished steel shovel. It smashed the camera. It felled the girl and then the boy. Jed fought me for a desperate hissing moment before he was bludgeoned into helplessness. Then the android dragged them to the furnace and fed them to the flames, slowly, hideously. It capered and sang. Then it returned to my hotel.

The thermometer in the power plant registered 100.9° murderously Fahrenheit. All reet! All reet!

We bought steerage on the Lyra Queen and Vandaleur and the android did odd jobs for their meals. During the night watches, Vandaleur would sit alone in the steerage head with a cardboard portfolio on his lap, puzzling over its contents. That portfolio was all he had managed to bring with him from Lyra Alpha. He had stolen it from Wanda's room. It was labelled ANDROID. It contained the secret of my sickness.

And it contained nothing but newspapers. Scores of newspapers from all over the galaxy, printed, microfilmed, engraved, etched, offset, photostated . . . Rigel *Star-Banner* . . . Paragon *Picayune* . . . Megaster *Times-Leader* . . . Lalande *Herald* . . . Lacaille *Journal* . . . Indi *Intelligence* . . . Eridani *Telegram-News*. All reet! All reet!

Nothing but newspapers. Each paper contained an account of one crime in the android's ghastly career. Each paper also contained news, domestic

and foreign, sports, society, weather, shipping news, stock exchange quotations, human interest stories, features, contests, puzzles. Somewhere in that mass of uncollated facts was the secret Wanda and Jed Stark had discovered. Vandaleur pored over the papers helplessly. It was beyond him. So jeet your seat!

"I'll sell you," I told the android. "Damn you. When we land on Terra, I'll sell you. I'll settle for 3 per cent on whatever you're worth."

"I am worth fifty-seven thousand dollars on the current exchange," I told him.

"If I can't sell you, I'll turn you into the police," I said.

"I am valuable property," I answered. "It is forbidden to endanger valuable property. You won't have me destroyed."

"Christ damn you!" Vandaleur cried. "What? Are you arrogant? Do you know you can trust me to protect you? Is that the secret?"

The multiple aptitude android regarded him with calm accomplished eyes. "Sometimes," it said, "it is a good thing to be property."

It was 3 below zero when the Lyra Queen dropped at Croydon Field. A mixture of ice and snow swept across the field, fizzing and exploding into steam under the Queen's tail jets. The passengers trotted numbly across the blackened concrete to customs inspection, and thence to the airport bus that was to take them to London. Vandaleur and the android were broke. They walked.

By midnight they reached Piccadilly Circus. The December ice storm had not slackened and the statue of Eros was encrusted with ice. They turned right, walked down to Trafalgar Square and then along the Strand toward Soho, shaking with cold and wet. Just above Fleet Street, Vandaleur saw a solitary figure coming from the direction of St. Paul's. He drew the android into an alley.

"We've got to have money," he whispered. He pointed at the approaching figure. "He has money. Take it from him."

"The order cannot be obeyed," the android said.

"Take it from him," Vandaleur repeated. "By force. Do you understand? We're desperate."

"It is contrary to my prime directive," I said. "I cannot endanger life or property. The order cannot be obeyed."

"For God's sake!" Vandaleur burst out. "You've attacked, destroyed, murdered. Don't gibber about prime directives. You haven't any left. Get his money. Kill him if you have to. I tell you, we're desperate!"

"It is contrary to my prime directive," the android repeated. "The order cannot be obeyed."

I thrust the android back and leaped out at the stranger. He was tall, austere, competent. He had an air of hope curdled by cynicism. He carried a cane. I saw he was blind.

"Yes?" he said. "I hear you near me. What is it?"

"Sir . . ." Vandaleur hesitated. "I'm desperate."

"We are all desperate," the stranger replied. "Quietly desperate."

"Sir . . . I've got to have some money."

"Are you begging or stealing?" The sightless eyes passed over Vandaleur and the android.

"I'm prepared for either."

"Ah. So are we all. It is the history of our race." The stranger motioned over his shoulder. "I have been begging at St. Paul's, my friend. What I desire cannot be stolen. What is it you desire that you are lucky enough to be able to steal?"

"Money," Vandaleur said.

"Money for what? Come, my friend, let us exchange confidences. I will tell you why I beg, if you will tell me why you steal. My name is Blenheim."

"My name is . . . Vole."

"I was not begging for sight at St. Paul's, Mr. Vole. I was begging for a number."

"A number?"

"Ah yes. Numbers: rational, numbers irrational. Numbers imaginary. Positive integers. Negative integers. Fractions, positive and negative. Eh? You have never heard of Blenheim's immortal treatise on Twenty Zeros, or The Differences In Absence of Quantity?" Blenheim smiled bitterly. "I am the wizard of the Theory of Number, Mr. Vole, and I have exhausted the charm of number for myself. After fifty years of wizardry, senility approaches and the appetite vanishes. I have been praying in St. Paul's for inspiration. Dear God, I prayed, if You exist, send me a number."

Vandaleur slowly lifted the cardboard portfolio and touched Blenheim's hand with it. "In here," he said, "is a number. A hidden number. A secret number. The number of a crime. Shall we exchange, Mr. Blenheim? Shelter for a number?"

"Neither begging nor stealing, eh?" Blenheim said. "But a bargain. So all life reduces itself to the banal." The sightless eyes again passed over Vandaleur and the android. "Perhaps the All-Mighty is not God but a merchant. Come home with me."

On the top floor of Blenheim's house we shared a room—two beds, two closets, two washstands, one bathroom. Vandaleur bruised my forehead again and sent me out to find work, and while the android worked, I con-

sulted with Blenheim and read him the papers from the portfolio, one by one. All reet! All reet!

Vandaleur told him so much and no more. He was a student, I said, attempting a thesis on the murdering android. In these papers which he had collected were the facts that would explain the crimes of which Blenheim had heard nothing. There must be a correlation, a number, a statistic, something which would account for my derangement, I explained, and Blenheim was piqued by the mystery, the detective story, the human interest of number.

We examined the papers. As I read them aloud, he listed them and their contents in his blind, meticulous writing. And then I read his notes to him. He listed the papers by type, by type-face, by fact, by fancy, by article, spelling, words, theme, advertising, pictures, subject, politics, prejudices. He analysed. He studied. He meditated. And we lived together in that top floor, always a little cold, always a little terrified, always a little closer . . . brought together by our fear of it, our hatred between us. Like a wedge driven into a living tree and splitting the trunk, only to be forever incorporated into the scar tissue, we grew together. Vandaleur and the android. Be fleet be fleet!

And one afternoon Blenheim called Vandaleur into his study and displayed his notes. "I think I've found it," he said, "but I can't understand it."

Vandaleur's heart leaped.

"Here are the correlations," Blenheim continued. "In fifty papers there are accounts of the criminal android. What is there, outside the depredations, that is also in fifty papers?"

"I don't know, Mr. Blenheim."

"It was a rhetorical question. Here is the answer. The weather."

"What?"

"The weather." Blenheim nodded. "Each crime was committed on a day when the temperature was above ninety degrees Fahrenheit."

"But that's impossible," Vandaleur exclaimed. "It was cool on Lyra Alpha."

"We have no record of any crime committed on Lyra Alpha. There is no paper."

"No. That's right. I —" Vandaleur was confused. Suddenly he exclaimed.

"No. You're right. The furnace room. It was hot there. Hot! Of course. My God, yes! That's the answer. Dallas Brady's electric furnace . . . The rice deltas on Paragon. So jeet your seat. Yes. But why? Why? My God, why?"

I came into the house at that moment, and passing the study, saw

Vandaleur and Blenheim. I entered, awaiting commands, my multiple aptitudes devoted to service.

"That's the android, eh?" Blenheim said after a long moment.

"Yes," Vandaleur answered, still confused by the discovery. "And that explains why it refused to attack you that night on the Strand. It wasn't hot enough to break the prime directive. Only in the heat . . . The heat, all reet!" He looked at the android. A lunatic command passed from man to android. I refused. It is forbidden to endanger life. Vandaleur gestured furiously, then seized Blenheim's shoulders and yanked him back out of his desk chair to the floor. Blenheim shouted once. Vandaleur leaped on him like a tiger, pinning him to the floor and sealing his mouth with one hand.

"Find a weapon," he called to the android.

"It is forbidden to endanger life."

"This is a fight for self-preservation. Bring me a weapon!" He held the squirming mathematician with all his weight. I went at once to a cupboard where I knew a revolver was kept. I checked it. It was loaded with five cartridges. I handed it to Vandaleur. I took it, rammed the barrel against Blenheim's head and pulled the trigger. He shuddered once.

We had three hours before the cook returned from her day off. We looted the house. We took Blenheim's money and jewels. We packed a bag with clothes. We took Blenheim's notes, destroyed the newspapers; and we left, carefully locking the door behind us. In Blenheim's study we left a pile of crumpled papers under a half inch of burning candle. And we soaked the rug around it with kerosene. No, I did all that. The android refused. I am forbidden to endanger life or property.

All reet!

They took the tubes to Leicester Square, changed trains and rode to the British Museum. There they got off and went to a small Georgian house just off Russell Square. A shingle in the window read: NAN WEBB, PSYCHOMETRIC CONSULTANT. Vandaleur had made a note of the address some weeks earlier. They went into the house. The android waited in the foyer with the bag. Vandaleur entered Nan Webb's office.

She was a tall woman with gray shingled hair, very fine English complexion and very bad English legs. Her features were blunt, her expression acute. She nodded to Vandaleur, finished a letter, sealed it and looked up.

"My name," I said, "is Vanderbilt. James Vanderbilt."

"Quite."

"I'm an exchange student at London University."

"Quite."

"I've been researching on the killing android, and I think I've discovered

something very interesting. I'd like your advice on it. What is your fee?"

"What is your college at the University?"

"Why?"

"There is a discount for students."

"Merton College."

"That will be two pounds, please."

Vandaleur placed two pounds on the desk and added to the fee Blenheim's notes. "There is a correlation," he said, "between the crimes of the android and the weather. You will note that each crime was committed when the temperature rose above ninety degrees Fahrenheit. Is there a psychometric answer for this?"

Nan Webb nodded, studied the notes for a moment, put down the sheets of paper and said: "Synesthesia, obviously."

"What?"

"Synesthesia," she repeated. "When a sensation, Mr. Vanderbilt, is interpreted immediately in terms of a sensation from a different sense organ from the one stimulated, it is called synesthesia. For example: A sound stimulus gives rise to a simultaneous sensation of definite color. Or color gives rise to a sensation of taste. Or a light stimulus gives rise to a sensation of sound. There can be confusion or short circuiting of any sensation of taste, smell, pain, pressure, temperature and so on. D'you understand?"

"I think so."

"Your research has uncovered the fact that the android most probably reacts to temperature stimulus above the ninety degree level synesthetically. Most probably there is an endocrine response. Probably a temperature linkage with the android adrenal surrogate. High temperature brings about a response of fear, anger, excitement and violent physical activity . . . all within the province of the adrenal gland."

"Yes. I see. Then if the android were to be kept in cold climates . . ."

"There would be neither stimulus nor response. There would be no crimes. Quite."

"I see. What is projection?"

"How do you mean?"

"Is there any danger of projection with regard to the owner of the android?"

"Very interesting. Projection is a throwing forward. It is the process of throwing out upon another the ideas or impulses that belong to oneself. The paranoid, for example, projects upon others his conflicts and disturbances in order to externalize them. He accuses, directly or by implication, other men of having the very sicknesses with which he is struggling himself."

"And the danger of projection?"

"It is the danger of believing what is implied. If you live with a psychotic who projects his sickness upon you, there is a danger of falling into his psychotic pattern and becoming virtually psychotic yourself. As, no doubt, is happening to you, Mr. Vandaleur."

Vandaleur leaped to his feet.

"You are an ass," Nan Webb went on crisply. She waved the sheets of notes. "This is no exchange student's writing. It's the unique cursive of the famous Blenheim. Every scholar in England knows this blind writing. There is no Merton College at London University. That was a miserable guess. Merton is one of the Oxford Colleges. And you, Mr. Vandaleur, are so obviously infected by association with your deranged android . . . by projection, if you will . . . that I hesitate between calling the Metropolitan Police and the Hospital for the Criminally Insane."

I took out the gun and shot her.

Reet!

"Antares II, Alpha Aurigae, Acrux IV; Pollux IX, Rigel Centaurus," Vandaleur said. "They're all cold. Cold as a witch's kiss. Mean temperatures of 40° Fahrenheit. Never get hotter than 70. We're in business again. Watch that curve."

The multiple aptitude android swung the wheel with its accomplished hands. The car took the curve sweetly and sped on through the Northern marshes, the reeds stretching for miles, brown and dry, under the cold English sky. The sun was sinking swiftly. Overhead, a lone flight of bustards flapped clumsily eastward. High above the flight, a lone helicopter drifted toward home and warmth.

"No more warmth for us," I said. "No more heat. We're safe when we're cold. We'll hole up in Scotland, make a little money, get across to Norway, build a bankroll and then ship out. We'll settle on Pollux. We're safe. We've licked it. We can live again."

There was a startling *bleep* from overhead, and then a ragged roar: "ATTENTION JAMES VANDALEUR AND ANDROID. ATTENTION JAMES VANDALEUR AND ANDROID!"

Vandaleur started and looked up. The lone helicopter was floating above them. From its belly came amplified commands: "YOU ARE SURROUNDED. THE ROAD IS BLOCKED. YOU ARE TO STOP YOUR CAR AT ONCE AND SUBMIT TO ARREST. STOP ONCE!"

I looked at Vandaleur for orders.

"Keep driving," Vandaleur snapped.

The helicopter dropped lower: "ATTENTION ANDROID. YOU



ARE IN CONTROL OF THE VEHICLE. YOU ARE TO STOP AT ONCE. THIS IS A STATE DIRECTIVE SUPERSEDING ALL PRIVATE COMMANDS."

"What the hell are you doing?" I shouted.

"A state directive supersedes all private commands," the android answered. "I must point out to you that —"

"Get the hell away from the wheel," Vandaleur ordered. I clubbed the android, yanked him sideways and squirmed over him to the wheel. The car veered off the road in that moment and went churning through the frozen mud and dry reeds. Vandaleur regained control and continued westward through the marshes toward a parallel highway five miles distant.

"We'll beat their God-damned block," he grunted.

The car pounded and surged. The helicopter dropped even lower. A searchlight blazed from the belly of the plane.

"ATTENTION JAMES VANDALEUR AND ANDROID. SUBMIT TO ARREST. THIS IS A STATE DIRECTIVE SUPERSEDING ALL PRIVATE COMMANDS."

"He can't submit," Vandaleur shouted wildly. "There's no one to submit to. He can't and I won't."

"Christ!" I muttered. "We'll beat them yet. We'll beat the block. We'll beat the heat. We'll —"

"I must point out to you," I said, "that I am required by my prime directive to obey state directives which supersede all private commands. I must submit to arrest."

"Who says it's a state directive?" Vandaleur said. "Them? Up in that plane? They've got to show credentials. They've got to prove it's state authority before you submit. How d'you know they're not crooks trying to trick us?"

Holding the wheel with one arm, he reached into his side pocket to make sure the gun was still in place. The car skidded. The tires squealed on frost and reeds. The wheel was wrenched from his grasp and the car yawed up a small hillock and overturned. The motor roared and the wheels screamed. Vandaleur crawled out and dragged the android with him. For the moment we were outside the circle of light boring down from the helicopter. We blundered off into the marsh, into the blackness, into concealment . . . Vandaleur running with a pounding heart, hauling the android along.

The helicopter circled and soared over the wrecked car, searchlight peering, loudspeaker braying. On the highway we had left, lights appeared as the pursuing and blocking parties gathered and followed radio directions from the plane. Vandaleur and the android continued deeper and deeper into the marsh, working their way toward the parallel road and safety. It was night by now. The sky was a black matte. Not a star showed. The temperature was dropping. A southeast night wind knifed us to the bone.

Far behind there was a dull concussion. Vandaleur turned, gasping. The car's fuel had exploded. A geyser of flame shot up like a lurid fountain. It subsided into a low crater of burning reeds. Whipped by the wind, the distant hem of flame fanned up into a wall, ten feet high. The wall began marching down on us, crackling fiercely. Above it, a pall of oily smoke surged forward. Behind it, Vandaleur could make out the figures of men . . . a mass of beaters searching the marsh.

"Christ!" I cried and searched desperately for safety. He ran, dragging with him, until their feet crunched through the surface ~~ice or a pool~~ of water, trampled the ice furiously, then flung himself down in the numbing heat, pulling the android with us.

The wall of flame approached. I could hear the crackle and feel the ^{heat}. He could see the searchers clearly. Vandaleur reached into his side ^{pocket} for the gun. The pocket was torn. The gun was gone. He groaned and ^{shook} with cold and terror. The light from the marsh fire was blinding. Over ^{head} the helicopter floated helplessly to one side, unable to fly through the smoke and flames and aid the searchers who were beating far to the right ^{of} us.

"They'll miss us," Vandaleur whispered. "Keep quiet. That's an order. They'll miss us. We'll beat them. We'll beat the fire. We'll —"

Three distinct shots sounded less than a hundred feet from the fugitives. *Blam! Blam! Blam!* They came from the last three cartridges in my gun as the marsh fire reached it where it had dropped, and exploded the shells. The searchers turned toward the sound and began working directly toward us. Vandaleur cursed hysterically and tried to submerge even deeper to escape the intolerable heat of the fire. The android began to twitch.

The wall of flame surged up to them. Vandaleur took a deep breath and prepared to submerge until the flame passed over them. The android shuddered and burst into an ear-splitting scream.

"All reet! All reet!" it shouted. "Be fleet be fleet!"

"Damn you!" I shouted. I tried to drown it.

"Damn you!" I cursed him. I smashed his face.

The android battered Vandaleur, who fought it off until it exploded out of the mud and staggered upright. Before I could return to the attack, the live flames captured it hypnotically. It danced and capered in a lunatic rumba before the wall of fire. Its legs twisted. Its arms waved. The fingers writhed in a private rumba of their own. It shrieked and sang and ran in a crooked waltz before the embrace of the heat, a muddy monster silhouetted against the brilliant sparkling flare.

The searchers shouted. There were shots. The android spun around twice and then continued its horrid dance before the face of the flames. There was a rising gust of wind. The fire swept around the capering figure and enveloped it for a roaring moment. Then the fire swept on, leaving behind it a sobbing mass of synthetic flesh oozing scarlet blood that would never coagulate.

The thermometer would have registered 1200° wondrously Fahrenheit.

Vandaleur didn't die. I got away. They missed him while they watched the android caper and die. But I don't know which of us he is these days. Projection, Wanda warned me. Projection, Nan Webb told him. If you live with a crazy man or a crazy machine long enough, I become crazy too. Reet!

But we know one truth. We know they were wrong. The new robot and Vandaleur know that because the new robot's started twitching too. Reet! Here on cold Pollux, the robot is twitching and singing. No heat, but my fingers writhe. No heat, but it's taken the little Talley girl off for a solitary walk. A cheap labor robot. A servo-mechanism . . . all I could afford . . . but it's twitching and humming and walking alone with the child somewhere and I can't find them. Christ! Vandaleur can't find me before it's too late. Cool and discreet, honey, in the dancing frost while the thermometer registers 10° fondly Fahrenheit.

Now, while Simon Flagg's acquaintance with spells, incantations, charms and such like was limited, his knowledge of mathematical arcana was most comprehensive . . . which should have been fair warning to the devil.

The Devil and Simon Flagg

by ARTHUR PORGES

AFTER SEVERAL months of the most arduous research, involving the study of countless faded manuscripts, Simon Flagg succeeded in summoning the devil. As a competent medievalist, his wife had proved invaluable. A mere mathematician himself, he was hardly equipped to decipher Latin holographs, particularly when complicated by rare terms from Tenth Century demonology, so it was fortunate that she had a flair for such documents.

The preliminary skirmishing over, Simon and the devil settled down to bargain in earnest. The devil was sulky, for Simon had scornfully declined several of his most dependable gambits, easily spotting the deadly barb concealed in each tempting bait.

"Suppose you listen to a proposition from me for a change," Simon suggested finally. "At least, it's a straightforward one."

The devil irritably twirled his tail-tip with one hand, much as a man might toy with his key chain. Obviously, he felt injured.

"All right," he agreed, in a grumpy voice. "It can't do any harm. Let's hear your proposal."

"I will pose a certain question," Simon began, and the devil brightened, "to be answered within twenty-four hours. If you cannot do so, you must pay me \$100,000. That's a modest request compared to most you get. No billions, no Helen of Troy on a tiger skin. Naturally there must be no reprisals of any kind if I win."

"Indeed!" the devil snorted. "And what are *your* stakes?"

"If I lose, I will be your slave for any short period. No torment, no loss of soul — not for a mere \$100,000. Neither will I harm relatives or friends. Although," he amended thoughtfully, "there are exceptions."

The devil scowled, pulling his forked tail petulantly. Finally, a savage tug having brought a grimace of pain, he desisted.

"Sorry," he said flatly. "I deal only in souls. There is no shortage of

slaves. The amount of free, wholehearted service I receive from humans would amaze you. However, here's what I'll do. If I can't answer your question in the given time, you will receive not a paltry \$100,000, but any sum within reason. In addition, I offer health and happiness as long as you live. If I do answer it — well, you know the consequences. That's the very best I can offer." He pulled a lighted cigar from the air and puffed in watchful silence.

Simon stared without seeing. Little moist patches sprang out upon his forehead. Deep in his heart he had known what the devil's only terms would be. Then his jaw muscles knotted. He would stake his soul that nobody — man, beast, or devil — could answer *this* question in twenty-four hours.

"Include my wife in that health and happiness provision, and it's a deal," he said. "Let's get on with it."

The devil nodded. He removed the cigar stub from his mouth, eyed it distastefully, and touched it with a taloned forefinger. Instantly it became a large pink mint, which he sucked with noisy relish.

"About your question," he said, "it must have an answer, or our contract becomes void. In the Middle Ages, people were fond of proposing riddles. A few came to me with paradoxes, such as that one about a village with one barber who shaves all those, and only those, who don't shave themselves. 'Who shaves the barber?' they asked. Now, as Russell has noted, the 'all' makes such a question meaningless and so unanswerable."

"My question is just that — not a paradox," Simon assured him.

"Very well. I'll answer it. What are you smirking about?"

"Nothing," Simon replied, composing his face.

"You have very good nerves," the devil said, grimly approving, as he pulled a parchment from the air. "If I had chosen to appear as a certain monster which combines the best features of your gorilla with those of the Venusian Greater Kleep, an animal — I suppose one could call it that — of unique eye appeal, I wonder if your aplomb —"

"You needn't make any tests," Simon said hastily. He took the proffered contract, and satisfied that all was in order, opened his pocketknife.

"Just a moment," the devil protested. "Let me sterilize that; you might get infected." He held the blade to his lips, blew gently, and the steel glowed cherry red. "There you are. Now a touch of the point to some — ah — ink, and we're all set. Second line from the bottom, please; the last one's mine."

Simon hesitated, staring at the moist red tip.

"Sign," urged the devil, and squaring his shoulders, Simon did so.

When his own signature had been added with a flourish, the devil rubbed his palms together, gave Simon a frankly proprietary glance, and said jovi-

ally: "Let's have the question. As soon as I answer it, we'll hurry off. I've just time for another client tonight."

"All right," said Simon. He took a deep breath. "My question is this: Is Fermat's Last Theorem correct?"

The devil gulped. For the first time his air of assurance weakened.

"Whose last what?" he asked in a hollow voice.

"Fermat's Last Theorem. It's a mathematical proposition which Fermat, a Seventeenth Century French mathematician, claimed to have proved. However, his proof was never written down, and to this day nobody knows if the theorem is true or false." His lips twitched briefly as he saw the devil's expression. "Well, there you are — go to it!"

"Mathematics!" the devil exclaimed, horrified. "Do you think I've had time to waste learning such stuff? I've studied the Trivium and Quadrivium, but as for algebra — say," he added resentfully, "what kind of a question is that to ask me?"

Simon's face was strangely wooden, but his eyes shone. "You'd rather run 75,000 miles and bring back some object the size of Boulder Dam, I suppose!" he jeered. "Time and space are easy for you, aren't they? Well, sorry. I prefer this. It's a simple matter," he added, in a bland voice. "Just a question of positive integers."

"What's a positive integer?" the devil flared. "Or an integer, for that matter?"

"To put it more formally," Simon said, ignoring the devil's question, "Fermat's Theorem states that there are no non-trivial, rational solutions of the equation $X^n + Y^n = Z^n$, for n a positive integer greater than two."

"What's the meaning of —"

"You supply the answers, remember."

"And who's to judge — you?"

"No," Simon replied sweetly. "I doubt if I'm qualified, even after studying the problem for years. If you come up with a solution, we'll submit it to any good mathematical journal, and their referee will decide. And you can't back out — the problem obviously is soluble: either the theorem is true, or it is false. No nonsense about multivalued logic, mind. Merely determine which, and *prove* it in twenty-four hours. After all, a man — excuse me — demon, of your intelligence and vast experience surely can pick up a little math in that time."

"I remember now what a bad time I had with Euclid when I studied at Cambridge," the devil said sadly. "My proofs were always wrong, and yet it was all obvious anyway. You could see just by the diagrams." He set his jaw. "But I can do it. I've done harder things before. Once I went to a distant star and brought back a quart of neutronium in just sixteen —"

"I know," Simon broke in. "You're very good at such tricks."

"Trick, nothing!" was the angry retort. "It's a technique so difficult — but never mind, I'm off to the library. By this time tomorrow —"

"No," Simon corrected him. "We signed half an hour ago. Be back in exactly twenty-three point five hours! Don't let me rush you," he added ironically, as the devil gave the clock a startled glance. "Have a drink and meet my wife before you go."

"I never drink on duty. Nor have I time to make the acquaintance of your wife . . . now." He vanished.

The moment he left, Simon's wife entered.

"Listening at the door again?" Simon chided her, without resentment.

"Naturally," she said in her throaty voice. "And darling — I want to know — that question — is it really difficult? Because if it's not — Simon, I'm so worried."

"It's difficult, all right." Simon was almost jaunty. "But most people don't realize that at first. You see," he went on, falling automatically into his stance for Senior Math II, "anybody can find two whole numbers whose squares add up to a square. For example, $3^2 + 4^2 = 5^2$; that is, $9 + 16 = 25$. See?"

"Uh huh." She adjusted his tie.

"But when you try to find two cubes that add up to a cube, or higher powers that work similarly, there don't seem to be any. Yet," he concluded dramatically, "nobody has been able to prove that no such numbers exist. Understand now?"

"Of course." Simon's wife always understood mathematical statements, however abstruse. Otherwise, the explanation was repeated until she did, which left little time for other activities.

"I'll make us some coffee," she said, and escaped.

Four hours later as they sat together listening to Brahm's Third, the devil reappeared.

"I've already learned the fundamentals of algebra, trigonometry, and plane geometry!" he announced triumphantly.

"Quick work," Simon complimented him. "I'm sure you'll have no trouble at all with spherical, analytic; projective, descriptive, and non-Euclidean geometries."

The devil winced. "Are there so many?" he inquired in a small voice.

"Oh, those are only a few." Simon had the cheerful air suited to a bearer of welcome tidings. "You'll like non-Euclidean," he said mendaciously. "There you don't have to worry about diagrams — they don't tell a thing! And since you hated Euclid anyway —"

With a groan the devil faded out like an old movie. Simon's wife giggled. "Darling," she sang, "I'm beginning to think you've got him over a barrel."

"Sh," said Simon. "The last movement. Glorious!"

Six hours later, there was a smoky flash, and the devil was back. Simon noted the growing bags under his eyes. He suppressed a grin.

"I've learned all those geometries," the devil said with grim satisfaction. "It's coming easier now. I'm about ready for your little puzzle."

Simon shook his head. "You're trying to go too fast. Apparently you've overlooked such basic techniques as calculus, differential equations, and finite differences. Then there's —"

"Will I need all those?" the devil moaned. He sat down and knuckled his puffy eyelids, smothering a yawn.

"I couldn't say," Simon replied, his voice expressionless. "But people have tried practically every kind of math there is on that 'little puzzle,' and it's still unsolved. Now, I suggest —" But the devil was in no mood for advice from Simon. This time he even made a sloppy disappearance while sitting down.

"I think he's tired," Mrs. Flagg said. "Poor devil." There was no discernible sympathy in her tones.

"So am I," said Simon. "Let's get to bed. He won't be back until tomorrow, I imagine."

"Maybe not," she agreed, adding demurely, "but I'll wear the black lace — just in case."

It was the following afternoon. Bach seemed appropriate somehow, so they had Lańdowska on.

"Ten more minutes," Simon said. "If he's not back with a solution by then, we've won. I'll give him credit; he could get a Ph.D. out of my school in one day — with honors! However, —"

There was a hiss. Rosy clouds mushroomed sulphurously. The devil stood before them, steaming noisomely on the rug. His shoulders sagged; his eyes were bloodshot; and a taloned paw, still clutching a sheaf of papers, shook violently from fatigue or nerves.

Silently, with a kind of seething dignity, he flung the papers to the floor, where he trampled them viciously with his cloven hoofs. Gradually then, his tense figure relaxed, and a wry smile twisted his mouth.

"You win, Simon," he said, almost in a whisper, eyeing him with ungrudging respect. "Not even I can learn enough mathematics in such a short time for so difficult a problem. The more I got into it, the worse it became. Non-unique factoring, ideals — Baal! Do you know," he confided,

"not even the best mathematicians on other planets — all far ahead of yours — have solved it? Why, there's a chap on Saturn — he looks something like a mushroom on stilts — who solves partial differential equations mentally; and even he's given up." The devil sighed. "Farewell." He dislinned with a kind of weary precision.

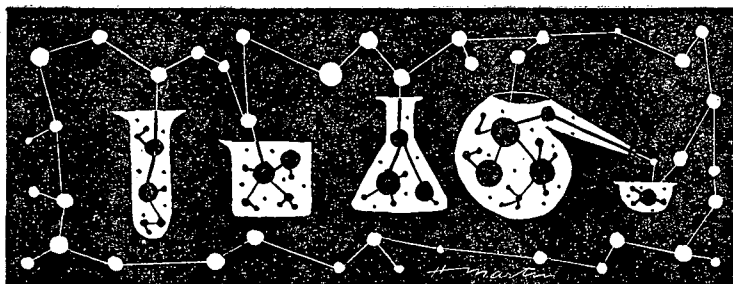
Simon kissed his wife — hard. A long while later she stirred in his arms.

"Darling," she pouted, peering into his abstracted face, "what's wrong now?"

"Nothing — except I'd like to see his work; to know how close he came. I've wrestled with that problem for —" He broke off amazed as the devil flashed back. Satan seemed oddly embarrassed.

"I forgot," he mumbled. "I need to — ah!" He stooped for the scattered papers, gathering and smoothing them tenderly. "It certainly gets you," he said, avoiding Simon's gaze. "Impossible to stop just now. Why, if I could only prove one simple little lemma —" He saw the blazing interest in Simon, and dropped his apologetic air. "Say," he grunted, "you've worked on this, I'm sure. Did you try continued fractions? Fermat must have used them, and — move over a minute, please —" This last to Mrs. Flagg. He sat down beside Simon, tucked his tail under, and pointed to a jungle of symbols.

Mrs. Flagg sighed. Suddenly the devil seemed a familiar figure, little different from old Professor Atkins, her husband's colleague at the university. Any time two mathematicians got together on a tantalizing problem . . . Resignedly she left the room, coffee pot in hand. There was certainly a long session in sight. She knew. After all, she was a professor's wife.



When Bleiler and Dikry reprinted Zenna Henderson's Ararat (F&SF, October, 1952) in their THE BEST SCIENCE FICTION STORIES: 1953, they described it as "a charming story of normally unnormal people in a refuge." Now we meet again those interstellar displaced persons, The People, who were the protagonists of Ararat — this time in no refuge, but in the ordinary life of earth in which their normal unnormalities must be carefully concealed because "different is dead." Those of you who welcomed the first chronicle of The People as one of the most human and moving of modern science fiction stories will meet old friends here and make new ones, with new and touching problems; and those who have not read Ararat will find that this sequel stands on its own as a sensitive study of the inherent tragedy of difference — even when the difference is a seeming superiority.

Gilead

by ZENNA HENDERSON

ILLUSTRATIONS BY NICK SOLOVIOFF

I DON'T KNOW when it was that I found out that our family was different from other families. There was nothing to point it out. We lived in a house very like the other houses in Socorro. Our pasture lot sloped down just like the rest through arrowweed and mesquite trees to the sometimes Rio Gordo that looped around town. And on occasion our cow bawled just as loudly across the river at Jacobs' bull as all the other cows in all the other pasture lots. And I spent as many lazy days as any other boy in Socorro, lying on my back in the thin shade of the mesquites, chewing on the beans when work was waiting somewhere. It never occurred to me to wonder if we were different.

I suppose my first realization came soon after I started to school and fell in love — with the girl with the longest pigtailed and the widest gap in her front teeth of all the girls in my room. I think she was seven to my six.

My girl and I had wandered down behind the school woodshed, under the cottonwoods, to eat our lunch together, ignoring the chanted "Peter's got a gir-ul! Peter's got a gir-ul!" and the whittling fingers that shamed me for showing my love. We ate our sandwiches and pickles and then lay

back, arms doubled under our heads, and blinked at the bright sky while we tried to keep the crumbs from our cupcakes from falling into our ears. I was so full of lunch, contentment and love that I suddenly felt I just had to do something spectacular for my lady love. I sat up, electrified by a great idea and with the knowledge that I could carry it out.

"I can fly, I say! You just watch!" And lifting my arms, I swooped to my feet, leaving my love sitting gape-mouthed in the grass.

"You can't neither fly! Don't be crazy!"

"I can too fly!"

"You can not neither!"

"I can fly, I say! You just watch!" And lifting my arms, I swooped up to the roof of the shed. I leaned over the edge and said, "See there? I can too!"

"I'll tell Teacher on you!" she gasped, wide-eyed, staring up at me. "You ain't supposed to climb up on the shed."

"Oh, poof," I said, "I didn't climb. Come on, you fly up, too. Here, I'll help you."

And I slid down the air to the ground. I put my arms around my love and lifted. She screamed and wrenched away from me and fled shrieking back to the school house. Somewhat taken aback by her desertion, I gathered up the remains of my cake and hers and was perched comfortably on the ridgepole of the shed, enjoying the last crumbs, when Teacher arrived with half the school trailing behind her.

"Peter Merrill! How many times have you been told not to climb things at school?"

I peered down at her, noting with interest that the spit curls on her cheeks had been jarred loose by her hurry and agitation and one of them was straightening out, contrasting oddly with the rest of her shingled bob.

"Hang on tight until Stanley gets the ladder!"

"I can get down," I said, scrambling off the ridgepole. "It's easy."

"Peter!" shrieked Teacher. "Stay where you are!"

So I did, wondering at all the fuss.

By the time they got me down and Teacher yanked me by one arm back up to the school house, I was bawling at the top of my voice, outraged and indignant because no one would believe me, even my girl denying obstinately the evidence of her own eyes. Teacher, annoyed at my persistence, said over and over, "Don't be silly, Peter. You can't fly. Nobody can fly. Where are your wings?"

"I don't need wings," I bellowed. "People don't need wings. I ain't a bird!"

"Then you can't fly. Only things with wings can fly."

So I alternately cried and kicked the schoolhouse steps for the rest of the noon hour and then I began to worry for fear Teacher would tattle to Dad. After all, I had been on forbidden territory, no matter how I got there.

As it turned out, she didn't tell Dad, but that night after I was put to bed, I suddenly felt an all gone feeling inside me. Maybe I *couldn't* fly. Maybe Teacher was right. I sneaked out of bed and cautiously flew up to the top of the dresser and back. Then I pulled the covers up tight under my chin and whispered to myself, "I can so fly," and sighed heavily. Just another fun-stuff that grown-ups didn't allow, like having cake for breakfast or driving the tractor or borrowing the cow for an Indian pony on a warpath.

And that was all of that incident except that when Teacher met Mother and me at the store that Saturday, she ruffled my hair and said, "How's my little bird?" Then she laughed and said to Mother, "He thinks he can fly!"

I saw Mother's fingers tighten whitely on her purse and she looked down at me with all the laughter gone from her eyes. I was overflowed with incredulous surprise mixed with a fear and dread that made me want to cry even though I knew it was Mother's emotions and not my own that I was feeling.

Mostly Mother had laughing eyes. She was the laughingest mother in Socorro. She carried happiness inside her as if it were a bouquet of flowers and gave part of it to everyone she met. Most of the other-mothers seemed to have hardly enough to go around to their own families. And yet there were other times, like at the store, when laughter fled and fear showed through — and an odd wariness. Other times she made me think of a caged bird, pressing against the bars. Like one night I remember vividly.

Mother stood at the window in her ankle-length flannel nightgown, her long, dark hair lifting softly in the draft from the rattling window frames. A high wind was blowing in from a spectacular thunder storm in the Huachucas. I had been awakened by the rising crescendo and was huddled on the sofa wondering if I was scared or excited as the house shook with the constant thunder. Dad was sitting with the newspaper in his lap.

Mother spoke softly, but her voice came clearly through the tumult.

"Have you ever wondered what it would be like to be up there in the middle of the storm with clouds under your feet and over your head and lightning lacing around you like hot, golden rivers?"

Dad rattled his paper. "Sounds uncomfortable," he said.

But I sat there and hugged the words to me in wonder. I knew! I re-

remembered! "And the rain like icy silver hair lashing across your lifted face." I recited as though it were a loved lesson.

Mother whirled from the window and stared at me. Dad's eyes were on me, dark and troubled.

"How do you know?" he asked.

I ducked my head in confusion. "I don't know," I muttered.

Mother pressed her hands together, hard, her bowed head swinging the curtains of her hair forward over her shadowy face. "He knows because I know. I know because my mother knew. She knew because our People used to —" Her voice broke. "Those were her words —"

She stopped and turned back to the window, leaning her arm against the frame, her face pressed to it, like a child in tears.

"Oh, Bruce, I'm sorry!"

I stared, round-eyed in amazement, trying to keep tears from coming to my eyes as I fought against Mother's desolation and sorrow.

Dad went to Mother and turned her gently into his arms. He looked over her head at me. "Better run on back to bed, Peter. The worst is over."

I trailed off reluctantly, my mind filled with wonder. Just before I shut my door, I stopped and listened.

"I've never said a word to him, honest." Mother's voice quivered. "Oh, Bruce, I try so hard, but sometimes — oh sometimes!"

"I know, Eve. And you've done a wonderful job of it. I know it's hard on you, but we've talked it out so many times. It's the only way, honey."

"Yes," said Mother. "It's the only way, but — oh be my strength, Bruce! Bless the Power for giving me you!"

I shut my door softly and huddled in the dark in the middle of my bed until I felt Mother's anguish smooth out to loving warmth again. Then for no good reason, I flew solemnly to the top of the dresser and back, crawled into bed and relaxed. And remembered. Remembered the hot, golden rivers, the clouds over and under and the wild winds that buffeted like foam-frosted waves. But with all the sweet remembering was the reminder, *You can't because you're only eight. You're only eight. You'll have to wait.*

And then Bethie was born, almost in time for my ninth birthday. I remember peeking over the edge of the bassinet at the miracle of tiny fingers and spun-sugar hair. Bethie, my little sister. Bethie, who was whispered about and stared at when Mother let her go to school, though mostly she kept her home even after she was old enough. Because Bethie was different — too.

When Bethie was a month old, I smashed my finger in the bedroom door. I cried for a quarter of an hour. *I* cried for a quarter of an hour, but Bethie sobbed on and on until the last pain left my finger.

When Bethie was six months old, our little terrier, Glib, got caught in a gopher trap. He dragged himself, yelping, back to the house dangling the trap. Bethie screamed until Glib fell asleep over his bandaged paw.

Dad had acute appendicitis when Bethie was two, but it was Bethie who had to be given a sedative until we could get Dad to the hospital.

One night Dad and Mother stood over Bethie as she slept restlessly under sedatives. Mr. Tyree-next-door had been cutting wood and his ax slipped. He lost a big toe and a pint or so of blood, but as Doctor Dueff skidded to a stop on our street, it was into our house that he rushed first and then to Mr. Tyree-next-door who lay with his foot swathed and propped up on a chair, his hands pressed to his ears to shut out Bethie's screams.

"What can we do, Eve?" asked Dad. "What does the doctor say?"

"Nothing. They can do nothing for her. He hopes she will outgrow it. He doesn't understand it. He doesn't know that she —"

"What's the matter? What makes her like this?" Dad asked despairingly.

Mother winced. "She's a Sensitive," she said. "Among my People there were such — but not so young. Their perception made it possible for them to help sufferers. Bethie has only half the gift. She has no control."

"Because of me?" Dad's voice was ragged.

Mother looked at him with steady, loving eyes. "Because of us, Bruce. It was the chance we took. We pushed our luck after Peter."

So there we were, the two us — different . . . but different in our differences. For me, it was mostly fun — but not for Bethie.

We had to be careful for Bethie. She tried school at first, but skinned knees and rough rassling and aching teeth and bumped heads and the janitor's Monday hangover sent her home exhausted and shaking the first day, with hysteria hanging on the flick of an eyelash. So Bethie read for Mother and learned her numbers and leaned wistfully over the gate as the other children went by.

It wasn't long after Bethie's first day in school that I found a practical use for my difference. Dad sent me out to the woodshed to stack a cord of mesquite that Delfino dumped into our back yard from his old wood wagon. I had a date to explore an old fluorspar mine with some other guys and bitterly resented being sidetracked. I slouched out to the woodpile and stood, hands in pockets, kicking the heavy, rough stove lengths. Finally I carried in one arm-load, grunting under the weight, and afterwards sucking the round of my thumb where the sliding wood had peeled me. I hunkered down on my heels and stared as I sucked. Suddenly something

prickled inside my brain. If I could fly, why couldn't I make the wood fly? *And I knew I could!* I leaned forward and flipped a finger under half a dozen sticks, concentrating as I did so. They lifted into the air and hovered. I pushed them into the shed, guided them to where I wanted them and distributed them like dealing a pack of cards. It didn't take me long to figure out the maximum load and I had all the wood stacked in a wonderfully short time.

I whistled into the house for my flashlight. The mine was spooky and dark and I was the only one of the gang with a flashlight.

"I told you to stack the wood." Dad looked up from his milk records.

"I did," I said, grinning.

"Cut the kidding," grunted Dad. "You couldn't be done already."

"I am, though," I said triumphantly. "I found a new way to do it. You see —" I stopped, frozen by Dad's look.

"We don't need any new ways around here," he said evenly. "Go back out there until you've had time to stack the wood right!"

"It *is* stacked," I protested. "And the kids are waiting for me!"

"I'm not arguing, son," said Dad, white-faced. "Go back out to the shed."

I went, past Mother, who had come in from the kitchen and whose hand half went out to me, back out to the shed. I sat there fuming for a long time, stubbornly set that I wouldn't leave till Dad told me to.

Then I got to thinking. Dad wasn't usually unreasonable like this. Maybe I'd done something wrong. Maybe it was bad to stack wood like that. Maybe — My thoughts wavered as I remembered whispers I'd overheard about Bethie. Maybe it — it was a crazy thing to do — an insane thing.

I huddled close upon myself as I considered it. *Crazy* means not doing like other people. *Crazy* means doing things ordinary people don't do. Maybe that's why Dad made such a fuss. Maybe I'd done an insane thing! I stared at the ground, lost in bewilderment. What *was* different about our family? And for the first time I was able to isolate and recognize the feeling I must have had for a long time — the feeling of being on the outside looking in — the feeling of apartness. With this recognition came a wariness, a need for concealment. If something were wrong, no one else must know — I must not betray . . .

Then Mother was standing beside me. "Dad says you may go now," she said, sitting down on my log.

"Peter . . ." She looked at me unhappily. "Dad's doing what is best. All I can say is: Remember that whatever you do, wherever you live, different is dead. You have to conform or — or die. But Peter, don't be

ashamed. Don't ever be ashamed!" Then swiftly her hands were on my shoulders and her lips brushed my ear. "Be different!" she whispered. "Be as different as you can. But don't let anyone see — don't let anyone know!" And she was gone up the back steps, into the kitchen.

As I grew further into adolescence, I seemed to grow further and further away from kids my age. I couldn't seem to get much of a kick out of what they considered fun. So it was that with increasing frequency in the years that followed, I took Mother's whispered advice, never asking for explanations I knew she wouldn't give. The wood incident had opened up a whole vista of possibilities — no telling what I might be able to do — so I got in the habit of going down to the foot of our pasture lot. There, screened by the brush and greasewood, I tried all sorts of experiments, never knowing whether they would work or not. I sweated plenty over some that didn't work — and some that did.

I found that I could snap my fingers and bring things to me, or send them short distances from me without bothering to touch them as I had the wood. I roosted regularly in the tops of the tall cottonwoods, swan-diving ecstatically down to the ground, warily, after I got too ecstatic once and crash-landed on my nose and chin. I even, by head-aching concentration that left me dizzy, set a small campfire ablaze. Then blistered and charred both hands unmercifully by confidently scooping up the crackling fire.

Then I guess I got careless about checking for onlookers because some nasty talk got started. Bub Jacobs whispered around that I was "doing things" all alone down in the brush. His sly grimace as he whispered made the "doing things" any nasty perversion the listeners' imaginations could conjure up and the "alone" damned me on the spot. I learned bitterly then what Mother had told me. Different is dead — and one death is never enough. You die and die and die.

Then one day I caught Bub cutting across the foot of our wood lot. He saw me coming and hit for tall timber, already smarting under what he knew he'd get if I caught him. I started full speed after him, then ploughed to a stop. Why waste effort? If I could do it to the wood, I could do it to a blockhead like Bub.

He let out a scream of pure terror as the ground dropped out from under him. His scream flattened and strangled into silence as he struggled in mid-air, convulsed with fear of falling and the terrible thing that was happening to him. And I stood and laughed at him, feeling myself a giant towering above stupid dopes like Bub.

Sharply, before he passed out, I felt his terror and an echo of his scream rose in my throat. I slumped down in the dirt, sick with sudden reali-

zation, knowing with a knowledge that went beyond ordinary experience that I had done something terribly wrong, that I had prostituted whatever powers I possessed by using them to terrorize unjustly.

I knelt and looked up at Bub, crumpled in the air, higher than my head, higher than my reach, and swallowed painfully as I realized that I had no idea how to get him down. He wasn't a stick of wood to be snapped to the ground. He wasn't me, to dive down through the air. I hadn't the remotest idea how to get a human down.

Half-dazed I crawled over to a shaft of sunlight that slit the cottonwood branches overhead and felt it rush through my fingers like something to be lifted — and twisted — and fashioned and *used!* *Used on Bub!* But how? *How?* I clenched my fist in the flood of light, my mind beating against another door that needed only a word or look or gesture to open, but I couldn't say it, or look it, or make it.

I stood up and took a deep breath. I jumped, batting at Bub's heels that dangled a little lower than the rest of him. I missed. Again I jumped and the tip of one finger flicked his heel and he moved sluggishly in the air. Then I swiped the back of my hand across my sweaty forehead and laughed — laughed at my stupid self.



Cautiously, because I hadn't done much hovering, mostly just up and down, I lifted myself up level with Bub. I put my hands on him and pushed down hard. He didn't move.

I tugged him up and he rose with me. I drifted slowly and deliberately away from him and pondered. Then I got on the other side of him and pushed him toward the branches of the cottonwood. His head was beginning to toss and his lips moved with returning consciousness. He drifted though the air like a waterlogged stump, but he moved and I draped him carefully over a big limb near the top of the tree, anchoring his arms and legs as securely as I could. By the time his eyes opened and he clutched frenziedly for support, I was standing down at the foot of the tree, yelling up at him.

"Hang on, Bub! I'll go get someone to help you down!"

So for the next week or so, people forgot me, and Bub squirmed under "Who treed you, feller?" and "How's the weather up there?" and "Get a ladder, Bub, get a ladder!"

Even with worries like that, it was mostly fun for me. Why couldn't it be like that for Bethie? Why couldn't I give her part of my fun and take part of her pain?

Then Dad died, swept out of life by our Rio Gordo as he tried to rescue a fool Easterner who had camped on the bone-dry white sands of the river bottom in cloudburst weather. Somehow it seemed impossible to think of Mother by herself. It had always been Mother and Dad. Not just two parents but Mother-and-Dad, a single entity. And now our thoughts must limp to Mother-and, Mother-and. And Mother — well, half of her was gone.

After the funeral, Mother and Bethie and I sat in our front room, looking at the floor. Bethie was clenching her teeth against the stabbing pain of Mother's fingernails gouging Mother's palms.

I unfolded the clenched hands gently and Bethie relaxed.

"Mother," I said softly. "I can take care of us. I have my part-time job at the plant. Don't worry. I'll take care of us."

I knew what a trivial thing I was offering to her anguish, but I had to do something to break through to her.

"Thank you, Peter," said Mother, rousing a little. "I know you will —" She bowed her head and pressed both hands to her dry eyes with restrained desperation. "Oh, Peter, Peter! I'm enough of this world now to find death a despair and desolation instead of the solemnly sweet calling it is. Help me, help me!" Her breath labored in her throat and she groped blindly for my hand.

"If I can, Mother," I said, taking one hand as Bethie took the other. "Then help me remember. Remember with me."

And behind my closed eyes, I remembered. Unhampered flight through a starry night, a flight of a thousand happy people like birds in the sky, rushing to meet the dawn — the dawn of the Festival. I could smell the flowers that garlanded the women and feel the quiet exultation that went with the Festival dawn. Then the leader sounded the magnificent opening notes of the Festival song as he caught the first glimpse of the rising sun over the heavily wooded hills. A thousand voices took up the song. A thousand hands lifted in the Sign. . . .

I opened my eyes to find my own fingers lifted to trace a sign I did not know. My own throat throbbed to a note I had never sung. I took a deep breath and glanced over at Bethie. She met my eyes and shook her head sadly. She hadn't seen. Mother sat quietly, eyes closed, her face cleared and calmed.

"What was it, Mother?" I whispered.

"The Festival," she said softly. "For all those who had been called during the year. For your father, Peter and Bethie. We remembered it for your father."

"Where was it?" I asked. "Where in the world —"

"Not in this —" Mother's eyes flicked open. "It doesn't matter, Peter. You are of this world. There is no other for you."

"Mother," Bethie's voice was a hesitant murmur. "What do you mean, 'remember'?"

Mother looked at her and tears welled into her dry, burned-out eyes.

"Oh, Bethie, Bethie, all the burdens and none of the blessings! I'm sorry, Bethie, I'm sorry." And she fled down the hall to her room.

Bethie stood close against my side as we looked after Mother.

"Peter," she murmured, "what did Mother mean — none of the blessings?"

"I don't know," I said.

"I'll bet it's because I can't fly like you."

"Fly!" My startled eyes went to hers. "How do you know?"

"I know lots of things," she whispered. "But mostly I know we're different. Other people aren't like us. Peter, what made us different?"

"Mother?" I whispered. "Mother?"

"I guess so," murmured Bethie. "But how come?"

We fell silent and then Bethie went to the window where the late sun haloed her silvery blond hair in fire.

"I can do things, too," she whispered. "Look."

She reached out and took a handful of sun, the same sort of golden

sun-slant that had flowed so heavily through my fingers under the cottonwoods while Bub dangled above me. With flashing fingers she fashioned the sun into an intricate glowing pattern. "But what's it for?" she murmured, "except for pretty?"

"I know," I said, looking at my answer for lowering Bub. "I know, Bethie." And I took the pattern from her. It strained between my fingers and flowed into darkness.

The years that followed were casual, uneventful years. I finished high school but college was out of the question. I went to work in the plant that provided work for most of the employables in Socorro.

Mother built up quite a reputation as a midwife — a very necessary calling in a community which took literally the injunction to multiply and replenish the earth and which lay exactly 75 miles from a hospital no matter which way you turned when you got to the highway.

Bethie was in her teens and with Mother's help was learning to control her visible reactions to the pain of others, but I knew she still suffered as much as, if not more than, she had when she was smaller. But she was able to go to school most of the time now and was becoming quite popular in spite of her quietness.

So all in all, we were getting along quite comfortably and quite ordinarily except — well, I always felt as though I were waiting for something to happen, or for someone to come. And Bethie must have too, because she actually watched and listened — especially after a particularly bad spell. And even Mother. Sometimes as we sat on the porch in the long evenings, she would cock her head and listen intently, her rocking chair still. But when we asked what she heard, she'd sigh and say, "Nothing. Just the night." And her chair would rock again.

Of course I still indulged my differences. Not with the white fire of possible discovery that they had kindled when I first began, but more like the feeding of a small flame just "for pretty." I went farther afield now for my "holidays," but Bethie went with me. She got a big kick out of our excursions especially after I found that I could carry her when I flew, and most especially after we found, by means of a heart-stopping accident, that though she couldn't go up, she could control her going down. After that it was her pleasure to have me carry her up as far as I could and she would come down, sometimes taking an hour to make the descent, often weaving about her the intricate splendor of her sunshine patterns.

It was a rustling russet day in October when our world ended — again. We talked and laughed over the breakfast table, teasing Bethie about her date the night before. Color was high in her usually pale cheeks; and, with

all the laughter and brightness the tingle of fall, everything just felt good.

But between one joke and another, the laughter drained out of Bethie's face and the pinched, set look came to her lips.

"Mother!" she whispered, and then she relaxed.

"Already?" asked Mother, rising and finishing her coffee as I went to get her coat. "I had a hunch today would be the day. Reena would ride that jeep up Peppersauce canyon this close to her time."

I helped her on with her coat and hugged her tight.

"Bless-a-mama," I said, "When are you going to retire and let someone else snatch the fall and spring crops of kids?"

"When I snatch a grandchild or so for myself," she said, joking, but I felt her sadness. "Besides, she's going to name this one Peter — or Bethie, as the case may be." She reached for her little black bag and looked at Bethie. "No more yet?"

Bethie smiled. "No," she murmured.

"Then I've got plenty of time. Peter, you'd better take Bethie for a holiday. Reena takes her own sweet time and being just across the road makes it bad on Bethie."

"Okay, Mother," I said. "We planned one anyway, but we hoped this time you'd go with us."

Mother looked at me, hesitated and turned aside. "I — I might."

"Mother! Really?" This was the first hesitation from Mother in all the times we'd asked her.

"Well, you've asked me so many times and I've been wondering. Wondering if it's fair to deny our birthright. After all, there's nothing wrong in being of The People."

"What people, Mother?" I pressed. "Where are you from? Why *can* we —"

"Some other time, son," said Mother. "Maybe soon. These last few months I've begun to sense . . . Yes, it wouldn't hurt you to know even if nothing could ever come of it; and perhaps soon something *can* come, and you will have to know. But no," she chided as we clung to her. "There's no time now. Reena might fool us after all and produce before I get there. You kids scoot, now!"

We looked back as the pickup roared across the highway and headed for Mandigo's Peak. Mother answered our wave and went in the gate of Reena's yard where Dalt, in spite of this being their sixth, was running like an anxious puppy dog from Mother to the porch and back again.

It was a day of perfection for us. The relaxation of flight for me, the delight of hovering for Bethie, the frosted glory of the burning blue sky, the russet and gold of grass lands stretching for endless miles down from the snow-flecked blue and gold Mendigo.

At lunch time we lolled in the pleasant warmth of our favorite baby box canyon that held the sun and shut out the wind. After we ate, we played our favorite game, Remembering. It began with my clearing my mind so that it lay as quiet as a hidden pool of water, as receptive as the pool to every pattern the slightest breeze might start quivering across its surface.

Then the memories would come — strange, un-earthlike memories that were like those Mother and I had had when Dad died. Bethie could not remember with me, but she seemed to catch the memories from me almost before the words could form in my mouth.

So this last lovely "holiday" we remembered again our favorite. We walked the darkly gleaming waters of a mountain lake, curling our toes in the liquid coolness, loving the tilt and sway of the waves beneath our feet, feeling around us from shore and sky a dear familiarity that was stronger than any earth ties we had yet formed.

Before we knew it, the long lazy afternoon had fled and we shivered in the sudden chill as the sun dropped westward, nearing the peaks of the Huachuchas. We packed the remains of our picnic in the basket and I turned to Bethie, to lift her and carry her back to the pickup.

She was smiling her soft little secret smile.

"Look, Peter," she murmured. And, flicking her fingers over her head, she shook out a cloud of snowflakes, gigantic, whirling, tumbling snowflakes that clung feather-soft to her pale hair and melted, glistening, across her warm cheeks and mischievous smile.

"Early winter, Peter!" she said.

"Early winter; punkin!" I cried and snatching her up, boosted her out of the little canyon and jumped over her, clearing the boulders she had to scramble over. "For that you walk, young lady!"

But she almost beat me to the car anyway. For one who couldn't fly, she was learning to run awfully light.

Twilight had fallen before we got back to the highway. We could see the headlights of the scurrying cars that seldom even slowed down for Socorro. "So this is Socorro, wasn't it?" was the way most traffic went through.

We had topped the last rise before the highway when Bethie screamed. I almost lost control of the car on the rutty road. She screamed again, a wild tortured cry as she folded in on herself.

"Bethie!" I called, trying to get through to her. "What is it? Where is it? Where can I take you?"

But her third scream broke off short and she slid limply to the floor. I was terrified. She hadn't reacted like this in years. She had never fainted

like this before. Could it be that Reena hadn't had her child yet? That she was in such agony — But even when Mrs. Allbeg died in childbirth, Bethie hadn't — I lifted Bethie to the seat and drove wildly homeward, praying that Mother would be —

And then I saw it. In front of our house. The big car skewed across the road. The kneeling cluster of people on the pavement.

The next thing I knew, I was kneeling too, beside Dr. Dueff, clutching the edge of the blanket that mercifully covered Mother from chin to toes. I lifted a trembling hand to the dark trickle of blood that threaded crookedly down from her forehead.

"Mother," I whispered. "Mother!"

Her eyelids fluttered and she looked up blindly. "Peter." I could hardly hear her. "Peter, where's Bethie?"

"She fainted. She's in the car," I faltered. "Oh Mother!"

"Tell the doctor to go to Bethie."

"But Mother!" I cried. "You —"

"I am not called yet. Go to Bethie."

We knelt by her bedside, Bethie and I. The doctor was gone. There was no use trying to get Mother to a hospital. Just moving her indoors had started a dark ooze from the corner of her mouth. The neighbors were all gone except Gramma Reuther who always came to troubled homes and had folded the hands of the dead in Socorro from the founding of the town. She sat now in the front room holding her worn Bible in quiet hands, after all these years no longer needing to look up the passages of comfort and assurance.

The doctor had quieted the pain for Mother and had urged sleep upon Bethie, not knowing how long the easing would last, but Bethie wouldn't take it.

Suddenly Mother's eyes were open.

"I married your father," she said clearly, as though continuing a conversation. "We loved each other so and they were all dead — all my people. Of course I told him first, and oh, Peter! He believed me! After all that time of having to guard every word and every move, I had someone to talk to — someone to believe me. I told him all about The People and lifted myself and then the car and turned it in mid-air above the highway — just for fun. It pleased him a lot but it made him thoughtful and later he said, "You know, honey, your world and ours took different turns way back there. We turned to gadgets. You turned to The Power.'"

Her eyes smiled. "He got so he knew when I was lonesome for The Home. Once he said, 'Homesick, honey? So am I. For what this world could have been. Or maybe — God willing — what it may become.'"

"Your father was the other half of me." Her eyes closed, and in the silence her breath became audible, a harsh, straining sound. Bethie crouched with both hands pressed to her chest, her face dead white in the shadows.

"We discussed it and discussed it," cried Mother. "But we had to decide as we did. We thought I was the last of The People. I had to forget The Home and be of earth. You children had to be of earth too, even if — That's why he was so stern with you, Peter. Why he didn't want you to — experiment. He was afraid you'd do too much around other people if you found out —" She stopped and lay panting. "Different is dead," she whispered, and lay, scarcely breathing for a moment.

"I knew The Home." Her voice was heavy with sorrow. "I remember The Home. Not just because my people remembered it, but because I saw it. I was born there. It's gone now. Gone forever. There is no Home. Only a band of dust between the stars!" Her face twisted with grief and Bethie echoed her cry of pain.

Then Mother's face cleared and her eyes opened. She half propped herself up in her bed.

"You have The Home, too," she said. "You and Bethie. You will have it always. And your children after you. Remember, Peter? Remember?"

Then her head tilted attentively and she gave a laughing sob. "Oh Peter! Oh Bethie! Did you hear it? I've been called! I've been called!" Her hand lifted in the Sign and her lips moved tenderly.

"Mother!" I cried fearfully. "What do you mean? Lie down. Please lie down!" I pressed her back against the pillows.

"I've been called back to the Presence," she said. "My years are finished. My days are totaled."

"But Mother," I blubbered like a child. "What will we do without you?"

"Listen!" whispered Mother, rapidly, one hand pressed to my hair. "You must find the rest. You must go right away. They can help Bethie. They can help you, Peter. As long as you are separated from them, you are not complete. I have felt them calling the last year or so and now that I am on the way to the Presence, I can hear them clearer, and clearer." She paused and held her breath. "There is a canyon — north. The ship crashed there, after our life-ships — Here, Peter, give me your hand." She reached urgently toward me and I cradled her hand in mine.

And I saw half the state spread out below me like a giant map. I saw the wrinkled folds of the mountains, the deceptively smooth roll of the desert up to the jagged slopes. I saw the blur of timber blunting the hills and I saw the angular writhing of the narrow road through the passes. Then I felt a sharp, pleasurable twinge, like the one you feel when seeing home after being away a long time.

"There!" whispered Mother, as the panorama faded. "I wish I could have known before. It's been lonely. . . ."

"But you, Peter," she said strongly. "You and Bethie must go to them."

"Why should we, Mother?" I cried in desperation. "What are they to us or we to them that we should leave Socorro and go among strangers?"

Mother pulled herself up in bed, her eyes intent on my face. She wavered a moment and then Bethie was crouched behind her, steadying her back.

"They are not strangers," she said clearly and slowly. "They are The People. We shared the ship with them during the Crossing. They were with us when we were out in the middle of emptiness with only the fading of stars behind and the brightening before to tell us we were moving. They, with us, looked at all the bright frosting of stars across the blackness, wondering if on one of them we would find a welcome.

"You are woven of their fabric. Even though your father was not of The People —"

Her voice died, her face changed. Bethie moved from in back of her and lowered her gently. Mother clasped her hands and sighed.

"It's a lonely business," she whispered. "No one can go with you. Even with them waiting, it's lonely."

In the silence that followed, we heard Gramma Reuther rocking quietly in the front room. Bethie sat on the floor beside me, her cheeks flushed, her eyes wide with a strange dark awe.

"Peter, it didn't hurt. It didn't hurt at all. It — healed!"

But we didn't go. How could we leave my job and our home and go off to — where? Looking for — whom? Because — why? It was mostly me, I guess, but I couldn't quite believe what Mother had told us. After all, she hadn't said anything definite. We were probably reading meaning where it didn't exist. Bethie returned again and again to the puzzle of Mother and what she had meant, but we didn't go.

And Bethie got paler and thinner and it was nearly a year later that I came home to find her curled into an impossibly tight ball on her bed, her eyes tight shut, snatching at breath that came out again in sharp moans.

I nearly went crazy before I at last got through to her and uncurled her enough to get hold of one of her hands. Finally, though, she opened dull, dazed eyes and looked past me.

"Like a dam, Peter," she gasped. "It all comes in. It should — it should! I was born to —" I wiped the cold sweat from her forehead. "But it just piles up and piles up. It's supposed to go somewhere. I'm supposed to do something! Peter Peter Peter!" She twisted on the bed, her distorted face pushing into the pillow.

"What does, Bethie?" I asked, turning her face to mine. "What does?" "Glib's foot and Dad's side and Mr. Tyree-next-door's toe —" and her voice faded down through the litany of years of agony.

"I'll go get Dr. Dueff," I said hopelessly.

"No," she turned her face away. "Why build the dam higher? Let it break. Oh soon soon!"

"Bethie, don't talk like that," I said, feeling inside me my terrible aloneness that only Bethie could fend off, now that Mother was gone. "We'll find something — some way —"

"Mother could help," she gasped. "A little. But she's gone. And now I'm picking up mental pain, too! Reena's afraid she's got cancer. Oh Peter Peter!" Her voice strained to a whisper. "Let me die! Help me die!"

Both of us were shocked to silence by her words. Help her die? I leaned against her hand. Go back into the Presence with the weight of unfinished years dragging at our feet? For if she went, I went too.

Then my eyes flew open and I stared at Bethie's hand. *What Presence? Whose ethics and mores were talking in my mind?*

And so I had to decide. I talked Bethie into a sleeping pill and sat by her even after she was asleep. And sitting there, all the past years wound through my head. The way it must have been for Bethie all this time, and I hadn't let myself know.

Just before dawn I woke Bethie. We packed and went. I left a note on the kitchen table for Dr. Dueff saying only that we were going to look for help for Bethie and would he ask Reena to see to the house. And thanks.

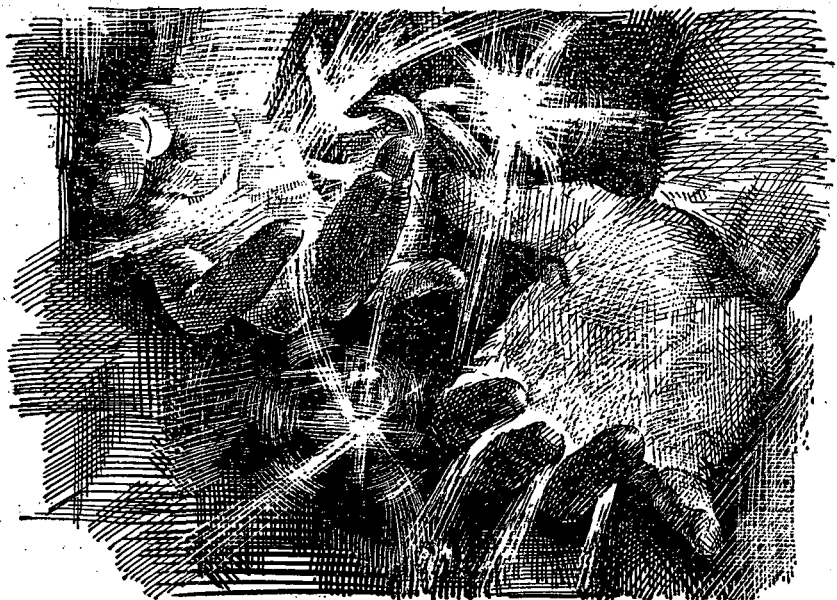
I slewed the pickup over to the side of the junction and slammed the brakes on.

"Okay," I said hopelessly. "You choose which way this time. Or shall we toss for it? Heads straight up, tails straight down!"

"I can't tell where to go, Bethie. I had only that one little glimpse that Mother gave me of this country. There's a million canyons and a million side roads. We were fools to leave Socorro. After all, we have nothing to go on but what Mother said. It might have been delirium."

"No," murmured Bethie. "It can't be. It's got to be real."

"But Bethie," I said, leaning my weary head on the steering wheel. "You know how much I want it to be true, not only for you, but for myself, too. But look. What do we have to assume if Mother was right? First, that space travel is possible — was possible nearly fifty years ago. Second, that Mother and her People came here from another planet. Third, that we are, bluntly speaking, half-breeds, a cross between earth and heaven knows



what world. Fourth, that there's a chance — in ten million — of our finding the other People who came at the same time Mother did, presupposing that any of them survived the Crossing.

"Why, any one of these premises would brand us as crazy crackpots to any normal person. No, we're building too much on a dream and a hope. Let's go back, Bethie. We've got just enough gas money along to make it. Let's give it up."

"And go back to what?" asked Bethie, her face pinched. "No, Peter. Here."

I looked up as she handed me one of her sunlight patterns, a handful of brilliance that twisted briefly in my fingers before it flickered out.

"Is that earth?" she asked quietly. "How many of our friends can fly? How many . . ." She hesitated. "How many can Remember?"

"Remember!" I said slowly, and then I whacked the steering wheel with my fist. "Oh, Bethie, of all the stupid —! Why, it's Bub all over again!"

I kicked the pickup into life and turned on the first faint desert trail beyond the junction. I pulled off even that suggestion of a trail and headed across the nearly naked desert toward a clump of ironwood, mesquite and catclaw that marked a sand wash against the foothills. With the westerling sun making shadow lace through the thin foliage, we made camp.

I lay on my back in the wash and looked deep into the arch of the desert sky. The trees made a typical desert pattern of warmth and coolness on me, warm in the sun, cool in the shadow, as I let my mind clear smoother, smoother, until the soft intake of Bethie's breath as she sat beside me sent a bright ripple across it.

And I Remembered. But only Mother-and-Dad and the little campfire I had gathered up, and Glib with the trap on his foot and Bethie curled, face to knees on the bed, and the thin crying sound of her labored breath.

I blinked at the sky. I *had* to Remember. I just had to. I shut my eyes and concentrated and concentrated, until I was exhausted. Nothing came now, not even a hint of memory. In despair I relaxed, limp against the chilling sand. And all at once, unaccustomed gears shifted and slipped into place in my mind and there I was, just as I had been, hovering over the life-sized map.

Slowly and painfully I located Socorro and the thin thread that marked the Rio Gordo. I followed it and lost it and followed it again, the finger of my attention pressing close. Then I located Vulcan Springs Valley and traced its broad rolling to the upsweep of the desert, to the Sierra Cobreña mountains. It was an eerie sensation to look down on the infinitesimal groove that must be where I was lying now. Then I hand-spanned my thinking around our camp spot. Nothing. I probed farther north, and east, and north again. I drew a deep breath and exhaled it shakily. There it was. The Home Twinge. The call of familiarity.

I read it off to Bethie. The high thrust of a mountain that pushed up baldly past its timber, the huge tailings dump across the range from the mountain. The casual wreathing of smoke from what must be a logging town, all forming sides of a slender triangle. Somewhere in this area was the place.

I opened my eyes to find Bethie in tears.

"Why, Bethie!" I said. "What's wrong? Aren't you glad —?"

Bethie tried to smile, but her lips quivered. She hid her face in the crook of her elbow and whispered: "I saw, too! Oh, Peter, this time I saw too!"

We got out the road map and by the fading afternoon light we tried to translate our rememberings. As nearly as we could figure out, we should head for a place way off the highway called Kerry Canyon. It was apparently the only inhabited spot anywhere near the big bald mountain. I looked at the little black dot in the kink in the third-rate road and wondered if it would turn out to be a period to all our hopes or the point for the beginning of new lives for the two of us. Life and sanity for Bethie, and for me — In a sudden spasm of emotion, I crumpled the map in my hand. I felt blindly

that in all my life I had never known anyone but Mother and Dad and Bethie. That I was a ghost walking the world. If only I could see even one other person that felt like our kind! Just to know that Bethie and I weren't all alone with our unearthly heritage!

I smoothed out the map and folded it again. Night was on us and the wind was cold. We shivered as we scurried around looking for wood for our campfire.

Kerry Canyon was one business street, two service stations, two saloons, two stores, two churches and a handful of houses flung at random over the hillsides that sloped down to an area that looked too small to accommodate the road and the creek which was now thinned to an intermittent trickle that loitered along, waiting for the fall rains to begin. A sudden speckling across our windshield suggested it hadn't long to wait.

We rattled over the old bridge and half through the town. The road swung up sharply over a rusty single-line railroad and turned left, shying away from the bluff that was hollowed just enough to accommodate one of the service stations.

We pulled into the station. The uniformed attendant came alongside. "We just want some information," I said, conscious of the thinness of my billfold. We had picked up our last tankful of gas before plunging into the maze of canyons between the main highway and here. Our stopping place would have to be soon whether we found The People or not.

"Sure! Sure! Glad to oblige." The attendant pushed his cap back from his forehead. "How can I help you?"

I hesitated, trying to gather my thoughts and words — and some of the hope that had jolted out of me since we left the junction.

"We're trying to locate some — friends — of ours. We were told they lived out the other side of here, out by Baldy. Is there anyone —?"

"Friends of *them* people?" he asked in astonishment. "Well, say, now, that's interesting! You're the first I ever had come asking after them."

I felt Bethie's arm trembling against mine. Then there *was* something beyond Kerry Canyon!

"How come? What's wrong with them?"

"Why, nothing, Mac, nothing. Matter of fact, they're dern nice people. Trade here a lot. Come in to church and the dances."

"Dances?" I glanced around the steep sloping hills.

"Sure. We ain't as dead as we look," grinned the attendant. "Come Saturday night, we're quite a town. Lots of ranches around these hills. Course, not much out Cougar Canyon way. That's where your friends live, didn't you say?"

"Yeah," I said. "Out by Baldy."

"Well, nobody else lives out that way." He hesitated. "Hey, there's something I'd like to ask."

"Sure," I said. "Like what?"

"Well, them people pretty much keep themselves to themselves. I don't mean they're stuck-up or anything, but — well, I've always wondered. Where they from? One of them overrun countries in Europe? They're foreigners, ain't they? And seems like most of what Europe exports any more is DP's. Are them people some?"

"Well, yes," I said, "You might call them that. Why?"

"Well, they talk just as good as anybody and it must have been a war a long time ago because they've been around since my Dad's time, but they just — feel different." He caught his upper lip between his teeth reflectively. "Good different. Real nice different." He grinned again. "Wouldn't mind shining up to some of them gals myself. Don't get no encouragement, though.

"Anyways, keep on this road. It's easy. No other road going that way. Jackass Flat will beat the tar outa your tires, but you'll probably make it, less'n comes up a heavy rain. Then you'll skate over half the county, and most likely end up in a ditch. Slickest mud in the world. Colder'n hell — beg pardon, lady — out there on the flat when the wind starts blowing. Better bundle up."

"Thanks, fella," I said. "Thanks a lot. Think we'll make it before dark?"

"Oh sure. 'Tain't so awful far, but the road's lousy. Oughta make it in two-three hours, less'n like I said, comes up a heavy rain."

We knew when we hit Jackass Flat. It was like dropping off the edge. If we thought the road to Kerry Canyon was bad, we revised our opinions, but fast. In the first place, it was choose your own ruts. Then the tracks were deep sunk in heavy clay generously mixed with sharp splintery shale and rocks as big as your two fists that were like a gigantic gravel as far as we could see across the lifeless expanse of the flat.

But to make it worse, the ruts I chose kept ending abruptly as though the cars that had made them either backed away from the job or jumped over. Jumped over! I drove, in and out of ruts, so wrapped up in surmises that I hardly noticed the rough going until a cry from Bethie aroused me.

"Stop the car!" she cried. "Oh, Peter! Stop the car!"

I braked so fast that the pickup swerved wildly, mounted the side of a rut, lurched, and settled sickeningly down on the back tire which sighed itself flatly into the rising wind.

"What on earth!" I yelped, as near to being mad at Bethie as I'd ever been in my life. "What was that for?"

Bethie, white-faced, was emerging from the army blanket she had huddled in against the cold. "It just came to me. Peter, supposing they don't want us?"

"Don't want us? What do you mean?" I growled, wondering if that lace doily I called my spare tire would be worth the trouble of putting it on.

"We never thought. It didn't even occur to us. Peter, we — we don't belong. We won't be like them. We're partly of earth — as much as we are of wherever else. Supposing they reject us? Supposing they think we're undesirable —" Bethie turned her face away. "Maybe we don't belong anywhere, Peter, not anywhere at all."

I felt a chill sweep over me that was not of the weather. We had assumed so blithely that we would be welcome. But how did we know? Maybe they *wouldn't* want us. We weren't of The People. We weren't of earth. Maybe we didn't belong — not anywhere.

"Sure they'll want us," I forced out heartily. Then my eyes wavered away from Bethie's and I said defensively, "Mother said they would help us. She said we were woven of the same fabric —"

"But maybe the warp will only accept genuine woof. Mother couldn't know. There weren't any — half-breeds — when she was separated from them. Maybe our earth blood will mark us —"

"There's nothing wrong with earth blood," I said defiantly. "Besides, like you said, what would there be for you if we went back?"

She pressed her clenched fists against her cheeks, her eyes wide and vacant. "Maybe," she muttered, "maybe if I'd just go on and go completely insane, it wouldn't hurt so terribly much. It might even feel good."

"Bethie!" My voice jerked her physically. "Cut out that talk right now! We're going on. The only way we can judge The People is by Mother. She would never reject us or any others like us. And that fellow back there said they were good people."

I opened the door. "You better try to get some kinks out of your legs while I change the tire. By the looks of the sky, we'll be doing some skating before we get to Cougar Canyon."

But for all my brave words, it wasn't just for the tire that I knelt beside the car and it wasn't only the sound of the lug wrench that the wind carried up into the darkening sky.

I squinted through the streaming windshield, trying to make out the road through the downpour that fought our windshield wiper to a standstill. What few glimpses I caught of the road showed a deceptively smooth looking chocolate river, but we alternately shook like a giant maraca, pushed out sheets of water like a speedboat, or slithered aimlessly and

terrifyingly across sudden mud flats that often left us yards off the road. Then we'd creep cautiously back until the soggy squelch of our tires told us we were in the flooded ruts again.

Then all at once it wasn't there. The road, I mean. It stretched a few yards ahead of us and then apparently just flowed over the edge, into the rain, into nothingness.

"It couldn't go there," murmured Bethie incredulously. "It can't just drop off like that."

"Well, I'm certainly not dropping off with it, sight unseen," I said, huddling deeper into my army blanket. My jacket was packed in back and I hadn't bothered to dig it out. I hunched my shoulders to bring the blanket up over my head. "I'm going to take a look first."

I slid out into the solid wall of rain that hissed and splashed around me on the flooded flat. I was soaked to the knees and mud-coated to the shins before I slithered to the drop-off. The trail — call that a road? — tipped over the edge of the canyon and turned abruptly to the right, then lost itself along a shrub-grown ledge that sloped downward even as it paralleled the rim of the canyon. If I could get the pickup over the rim and onto the trail, it wouldn't be so bad. But — I peered over the drop-off at the turn. The bottom was lost in shadows and rain. I shuddered.

Then quickly, before I could lose my nerve, I squelched back to the car.

"Pray, Bethie. Here we go."

There was the suck and slosh of our turning tires, the awful moment when we hung on the brink. Then the turn. And there we were, poised over nothing, with our rear end slewing outward.

The sudden tongue-biting jolt as we finally landed, right side up, pointing the right way on the narrow trail, jarred the cold sweat on my face so it rolled down with the rain.

I pulled over at the first wide spot in the road and stopped the car. We sat in the silence, listening to the rain. I felt as though something infinitely precious was lying just before me. Bethie's hand crept into mine and I knew she was feeling it too. But suddenly Bethie's hand was snatched from mine and she was pounding with both fists against my shoulder in most un-Bethie-like violence.

"I can't stand it, Peter!" she cried hoarsely, emotion choking her voice. "Let's go back before we find out any more. If they should send us away! Oh, Peter! Let's go before they find us! Then we'll still have our dream. We can pretend that some day we'll come again and find a welcome. If they send us away now, we can never come back. We can never dream again, never hope again!" She hid her face in her hands. "I'll manage somehow."

I'd rather go away, hoping, than run the risk of being rejected by them."

"Not me," I said, starting the motor. "We have as much chance for a welcome as we do for being kicked out. And if they can help you — Say, what's the matter with you today? I'm supposed to be the doubting one, remember? You're the mustard seed of this outfit!" I grinned at her, but my heart sank at the drawn white misery of her face. She almost managed a smile.

The trail led steadily downward, lapping back on itself as it worked back and forth along the canyon wall, sometimes steep, sometimes almost level. The farther we went, the more rested I felt, as though I were shutting doors behind or opening them before me.

Then came one of the casual miracles of mountain country. The clouds suddenly opened and the late sun broke through. There, almost frighteningly, a huge mountain pushed out of the featureless gray distance. In the flooding light, the towering slopes seemed almost to move, stepping closer to us as we watched. The rain still fell, but now in glittering silver-beaded curtains; and one vivid end of a rainbow splashed color recklessly over trees and rocks and a corner of the sky.

I didn't watch the road. I watched the splendor and glory spread out around us. So when, at Bethie's scream, I snatched back to my driving, all I took down into the roaring, splintering darkness was the thought of Bethie and the sight of the other car, slanting down from the bobbing top branches of a tree, seconds before it plowed into us broadside, a yard above the road.

I thought I was dead. I was afraid to open my eyes because I could feel the rain making little puddles over my closed lids. And then I breathed. I was alive, all right. A knife jabbed itself up and down my left chest and twisted itself viciously with each reluctant breath I drew.

Then I heard a voice.

"Thank the Power they aren't hurt too badly. But, oh, Valancy! What will Father say?" The voice was young and scared.

"You've known him longer than I have," answered another girl-voice. "You should have some idea."

"I never had a wreck before, not even when I was driving instead of lifting."

"I have a hunch that you'll be grounded for quite a spell," the second voice replied. "But that isn't what's worrying me, Karen. Why didn't we know they were coming? We always can sense Outsiders. We should have known —"

"Q. E. D. then," said the Karen-voice.

"Q. E. D.?"

"Yes. If we didn't sense them, then they're not Outsiders —" There was the sound of a caught breath and then, "Oh, what I said, Valancy! You don't suppose!" I felt a movement close to me and heard the soft sound of breathing. "Can it really be two more of Us? Oh Valancy, they must be second generation — they're about our age. How did they find us? Which of our Lost Ones were their parents?"

Valancy sounded amused. "Those are questions they're certainly in no condition to answer right now, Karen. We'd better figure out what to do. Look, the girl is coming to."

I was snapped out of my detached eavesdropping by a moan beside me. I started to sit up. "Bethie —" I began — and all the knives twisted through my lungs. Bethie's scream followed my gasp.

My eyes were open now, but good, and my leg was an agonized burning ache down at the far end of my consciousness. I gritted my teeth, but Bethie moaned again.

"Help her, help *her!*" I pleaded to the two fuzzy figures leaning over us as I tried to hold my breath to stop the jabbing.

"But she's hardly hurt," cried Karen. "A bump on her head. Some cuts."

With an effort I focused on a luminous, clear face — Valancy's — whose deep eyes bent close above me. I wet my lips and blurted foolishly, "You're not even wet in all this rain!" A look of consternation swept over her face. (There was a pause as she looked at me intently and then said, "Their shields aren't activated, Karen. We'd better extend ours.")

"Okay, Valancy." And the annoying sibilant wetness of the rain stopped.

"How's the girl?"

"It must be shock or maybe internal —"

I started to turn to see and Bethie's sobbing cry pushed me flat again.

"Help her," I gasped, grabbing wildly in my memory for Mother's words. "She's a — a Sensitive!"

"A Sensitive?" The two exchanged looks. "Then why doesn't she —?" Valancy started to say something, then turned swiftly. I crooked my arm over my eyes as I listened.

"Honey — Bethie — hear me!" The voice was warm but authoritative. "I'm going to help you. I'll show you how, Bethie."

There was a silence. A warm hand clasped mine and Karen squatted close beside me.

"She's Sorting her," she whispered. "Going into her mind. To teach her control. It's so simple. How could it happen that she doesn't know —?"

I heard a soft wondering, "Oh!" from Bethie, followed by a breathless, "Oh, thank you, Valancy, thank you!"

I heaved myself up onto my elbow, fire streaking me from head to foot, and peered over at Bethie. She was looking at me and her quiet face was happier than smiles could ever make it. We stared for the space of two relieved tears, then she said softly, "Tell them now, Peter. We can't go any farther until you tell them."

I lay back again, blinking at the sky where the scattered raindrops were still falling, though none of them reached us. Karen's hand was warm on mine and I felt a shiver of reluctance. If they sent us away —! But then, they couldn't take back what they had given to Bethie, even if — I shut my eyes and blurted it out as bluntly as possible.

"We aren't of The People — not entirely. Father was not of The People. We're half-breeds."

There was a startled silence.

"You mean your mother married an Outsider?" Valancy's voice was filled with astonishment. "That you and Bethie are —?"

"Yes she did and yes we are!" I retorted. "And Dad was the best —" My belligerence ran thinly out across the sharp edge of my pain. "They're both dead now. Mother sent us to you."

"But Bethie is a Sensitive —" Valancy's voice was thoughtful.

"Yes, and I can fly and make things travel in the air and I've even made fire. But Dad —" I hid my face and let it twist with the increasing agony.

"Then we *can!*" I couldn't read the emotion in Valancy's voice. "Then the People and Outsiders — But it's unbelievable that you —" Her voice died.

In the silence that followed, Bethie's voice came fearful and tremulous, "Are you going to send us away?" My heart twisted to the ache in her voice.

"Send you away! Oh my people, my people! Of course not! As if there were any question!" Valancy's arm went tightly around Bethie and Karen's hand closed warmly on mine. The tension that had been a hard twisted knot inside me dissolved and Bethie and I were home.

Then Valancy became very brisk.

"Bethie, what's wrong with Peter?"

Bethie was astonished. "How did you know his name?" Then she smiled. "Of course. When you were Sorting me!" She touched me lightly along my sides, along my legs. "Four of his ribs are hurt. His left leg is broken. That's about all. Shall I control him?"

"Yes," said Valancy, "I'll help."

And the pain was gone — put to sleep under the persuasive warmth that came to me as Bethie and Valancy came softly into my mind.

"Good," said Valancy. "We're pleased to welcome a Sensitive. Karen and I know a little of their function because we are Sorters. But we have no fullfledged Sensitive in our Group now."

She turned to me. "You said you knew the inanimate lift?"

"I don't know," I said. "I don't know the words for lots of things."

"You'll have to relax completely," she said. "We don't usually use it on people. But if you let go all over, we can manage."

They wrapped me warmly in our blankets and lightly, a hand under my shoulders and under my heels, lifted me carrying-high and sped with me through the trees, Bethie trailing from Valancy's free hand.

Before we reached the yard, the door flew open and warm yellow light spilled out into the dusk. The girls paused on the porch and shifted me to the waiting touch of two men. In the wordless pause before the babble of question and explanation, I felt Bethie beside me draw a deep wondering breath and merge like a raindrop in a river into the People around us.

But, even as the lights went out for me again, and I felt myself slide down into comfort and hunger-fed belongingness, somewhere deep inside of me was a core of something that couldn't quite — no, *wouldn't* quite dissolve — wouldn't yet yield itself completely to The People.

Coming Next Month

We doubt if there's a reader of F&SF who doesn't recall with excitement J. T. McIntosh's singularly human and convincing novelets *One in Three Hundred* and *One in a Thousand*, describing the flight of a hastily selected few from a doomed Earth to a barren Mars. In our next issue (on the stands in early August), this highly talented Scot concludes his trilogy with a short novel of the attempt to rebuild civilization on an alien planet, and the tragic discovery that even one unwise choice among the selected survivors may be . . . *One Too Many*.

This novel, which we think you'll find as memorable as its briefer predecessors, bulks large in the issue; but there'll be a wide assortment of shorter stories as well, ranging from a hilarious solution for interplanetary wars by Mack Reynolds to a moving psychological story of ghosts and time by Jack Finney — plus the first magazine story in many years by J. Francis McComas and the first science fiction by best-selling suspense-novelist Howard Rigsby.

Miriam Allen deFord, for whom the day obviously contains more hours than for most mortals, has always carried on extensive and absorbing correspondences in addition to a full-time writing career. Last January she brought us the story of her epistolary friendship with Charles Fort, illustrated by hitherto unpublished Fortiana; and now she introduces us to a less widely known but fascinating denizen of the borderlands of science: Dr. Alfonso L. Herrera. Again she largely allows her subject to speak for himself, in excerpts from unpublished letters; and the result is a singular portrait of a man of intense imagination and enthusiasm whose scientific integrity managed to restrain him just barely this side of the crackpot Mad Scientist . . . but who could not resist an occasional wild surmise worthy of Stapledonian science fiction.

Frustrated Frankenstein: Alfonso Herrera and his colpoids

by MIRIAM ALLEN DEFORD

VICTOR FRANKENSTEIN, that pioneer protagonist of science fiction, formed from organic materials an adult man-monster, and by a sort of chemical sleight-of-hand vitalized the creature, to its and his undoing.

Dr. Alfonso L. Herrera of Mexico, being a non-fictional character and a responsible scientist, naturally never had any such gaudy performance to present. All he did was to experiment, with startling results, in the borderland between the inorganic and the organic — and possibly between the inanimate and the animate.

The purely chemical artifacts which he produced in his laboratory in Mexico City, and which he called colpoids, were not in any sense living cells. They were pseudo-cells, pre-organisms. Their apparent uncanny imitations of life-processes were the result of osmotic pressure. Herrera never claimed they were more — though just once he was almost ready to do so.

What he did claim was that he was seeking to demonstrate the conditions under which life originally arose on earth, and under which presumably it could arise again, given exactly the same conditions. "Life must have been the result of natural energies and forces in the primitive environ-

ment. . . . Life is not a special phenomenon, but a property which all matter possesses under the right conditions."

As Dr. Jerome Alexander said, Herrera's artifacts "illustrate not living beings, but rather many of the physico-chemical concomitants of life." Nevertheless, in 1932 some of Herrera's experimental results seemed to approach so near to life that he himself could not be sure whether or not the "cells" were imitating life — or had attained it. In the ten years remaining to him, he never came so near again. But he never doubted that he was on the right track — that "the production of such structures and their identity with the morphology of living protoplasm and living cells indicate that the physical basis underlying the two must have much in common. . . . I do not pretend to have proved the origin of life on earth, but to have given evidence. Life could have started as a reaction of water and atmosphere to constituents of the soil."

Herrera's "colpoids," compounds of simple chemicals, imitated independent motion, respiration, nutrition, pursuit, flight, combat, the extrusion of pseudopods, and reproduction by fission. Compare this with the criteria of life given by Maynard Shipley in *The Key to Evolution*:

"To be *alive*, in the strictly scientific or biological sense, a cell or organism must be endowed with (1) *irritability*, the power of responding to stimulus in the wide sense; (2) *nutrition*, or utilization of food — breaking down and building up nutrient materials from inorganic or organic sources; (3) *respiration*; (4) *excretion*; and (5) the capacity for *growth* and *reproduction*."

As Willy Ley has said, the colpoids "behaved in general like irritated and hungry animalcules."

Yet their constituents were only such simple things as olive oil, gasoline, washing soda, tannin, glycerin, oleic acid, lime water, albumen, nitric acid, collodion, and linseed oil, in various combinations, and in essence they were only saponified particles.

Anyone with a modicum of chemical knowledge and equipment can produce colpoids. Probably the easiest and simplest of the methods is to dissolve 50 parts of olive oil in 100 parts of gasoline, in a sterilized porcelain dish. Then dissolve 14 parts of soda lye in 100 parts of distilled water, adding a pinch of aniline black or rhodamine to color it. Now insert a small amount of the soda mixture beneath the surface of the olive oil and gasoline.

The resultant drops "sway, shake, breathe, skip, pursue and evade other drops, advance pseudopods, fight, eat, and reproduce."

They are colpoids. Three quarters of an hour later, they are only tiny bits of soap.

Add gum arabic in the proper proportion, and the movements persist

for an hour; add lactose, and the "arms" of some bifurcate colpoids turn cannibal, and suck and "eat" each other! "Colpoids are the best imitations of living infusoria, and . . . present a marvelous imitation of Brownian movement, each granule being activated by osmotic currents and not by the kinetic energy of the liquid."

In all, Dr. Herrera performed more than 10,000 such experiments, using various constituents. The principle was always the same — the introduction into a suitable medium of an appropriate chemical compound, whereupon "osmotic cells arose, showing internal currents and a great variety of macroscopic and microscopic structures and movements, chiefly determined by changes of surface tension and the propulsive action of osmotic currents." These might include "conjugation; palpitation; deformation, contractile vacuoles, pseudopodia, nuclei, direct division and multiplication, growth, increase of surface and volume."

Now, as Jerome Alexander said in his *Colloid Chemistry*, "the sources of life lie in the submicroscopic field, below the surface of these artifacts. . . . The law of probability is strongly against chance grouping of the enormous number of molecules needed to make up an amoeba or a bacterium, but much more in favor of the chance formation of a living molecule or molecular group." But if, as Henry Fairfield Osborn put it in *The Origin and Evolution of Life*, "Life arose from a recombination of forces pre-existing in the cosmos; [it] does not represent the entrance either of a new form of energy or of a new series of laws, but is simply another step in the general evolutionary process," then Herrera's colpoids demonstrate, if not the actual way in which life began, at least an approach toward the process by which it could have arisen in the past — or could conceivably arise today.

The Eighteenth Century chemist, Abbé Jean Nollet, the discoverer of osmosis, coined the name "plasmogeny" for the study of osmotic phenomena. This name, fallen into disuse, Alfonso Herrera revived, broadening its definition. In 1926 he published in Barcelona an illustrated book describing his experiments up to that time. Its title was *Plasmogeny (La Plasmogenia)* — a word which he defined as "a new science of the origin of life." This "new science" included "a study of the lifelike behavior of artifacts, as well as all researches and theories serving to throw light on the origin of protoplasm."

Plasmogeny developed until there was a "Sociedad Internacional de Plasmogenia," with affiliates in both Europe (chiefly France and Spain) and the Americas. Whether it survived its founder's death in 1942 I have not been able to ascertain. But certainly Herrera himself extended the implications of the "new science" far beyond its original modest research

objectives. In a smaller volume published in Valencia in 1932, and in *The Universal Biology*, published in Madrid in 1933, he defined life as "the physico-chemical activity of protoplasm," and added:

"There is no [dichotomy of] living matter and dead matter, because everything has life within the Universe; everything that exists can be reduced to the mass or quantity of matter which a body contains, and its life, which is motion." (This seems to come perilously close to animism.) From the molecule to "the constellations of the Zodiac," he could find "no sufficient distinction between the living and the inert." To him it followed that "all the beings of the Universe are brothers" in the most literal sense, since all derive ultimately from a parent nebula, by way of its sons and their planets. The microcosm is, in its origin and nature, only an "imitation" of the macrocosm whence in the last analysis it emanated, by "a chain of union and causality."

We are a far way by now from blobs of soda lye in olive oil and gasoline! But to Herrera, the road was straight and clear. From the fringe area of science, and the safe company of chemical experimenters, he passed inevitably into that still more dubious area, the fringes of philosophy. By temperament and conviction he was at once a materialist and an idealist. The cold pursuit of scientific fact with no regard for ethical consequences was abhorrent to his nature. Not all men alone, but all existing things, were brothers; and only recognition of this great truth could solve mankind's almost insuperable problems. He summarized his "laws of Plasmogeny" thus:

"All organic phenomena have been, are, and will be produced by known physico-chemical causes. There is no 'vital force'; it has not been proved nor can it ever be proved, in view of the achievements of Plasmogeny, which produces cells without the prior existence of life.

"When crystallization takes place slowly in the presence of colloids, . . . cells and pseudo-entities are formed capable of growing and reproducing themselves, even though in a limited way; and, as the technique becomes perfected, it is very probable that they may multiply indefinitely. . . .

"When the physico-chemical conditions of a cooling planet are favorable for the production of solutions of colloids and unstable nitrogenous crystalloids, . . . cells will evolve with all transitions between the crystal and the organic, eventually developing into beings as complex and sensitive as mankind."

Herrera's scientific imagination did not balk at growth beyond humanity as we know it. He was perfectly willing to posit future "supermen or other unknown beings." "It is possible that . . . humanity will be extinguished,

thus correcting an error of Nature. . . . Mankind cannot and should not consider itself the final and most perfect form."

To Alfonso Herrera, all compact of courage, enthusiasm, and sympathy, such a prospect brought no sense of doom. On the contrary, since to him all life was inseparably one, to be superseded by a higher form was achievement, not disaster, for humanity.

He had plenty of courage, in any case, this little man with the high domed forehead, the crest of white hair, and the big mustache. Until he was retired for age, he had been chief of the division of biology of the Mexican Department of Agriculture, and director of its biological investigations. But there had been an earlier period, under a less liberal government; when his outspoken freethinking and his unconventional approach to scientific problems had got him into very serious trouble indeed.

I have heard — though I am unable to verify it — that he had been professor of biology at the University of Mexico and director of the zoological garden; and that he was dismissed from these posts because it was discovered that he had sponsored, or was planning to sponsor, some experiments on the possibility of cross-breeding the anthropoid apes and man. As I say, this may be scandal and not history, or half-and-half.

I do know that at the time, about 1925, when my husband, Maynard Shipley, first heard of Herrera's colpoids, and initiated a correspondence that grew into a long-distance friendship lasting until my husband's death in 1934, Dr. Alfonso Herrera held no official position whatever, and was earning a bare living, with a wife and two young daughters to support, by doing urinalyses and similar routine laboratory jobs for doctors and hospitals.

And one thing I shall never forget: when, in the midst of the great depression, Herrera learned of my husband's illness, this old man we had never seen wrote to us, from his own poverty, that he wanted to send us all the books he could spare from his library, so that we might sell them and use the proceeds! Naturally, we refused firmly to accept the sacrifice; but it was characteristic of the man.

He had his brief moment of exaltation, when in 1932 he became almost convinced that improbable chance had reproduced in his laboratory the very conditions attendant on the creation of life. He was working with sulphocyanide of ammonia and formaldehyde. Twenty-four hours later, there appeared green cells with red nuclei, which seemed to exhibit all the characteristics of blue-green algae. Two weeks later, he observed "the mitosis of the green cells. . . . Magnificent!"

"The coloration," he conceded, "seems to be due to traces of iron and copper, existing as impurities in the formaldehyde, combining with the

sulphocyanide. But you know that these minerals exist in organisms. Copper is a stimulant to vegetation. New problems: chlorophyll has not been synthesized" — and "life seems to appear at the same time as chlorophyll."

"If this is life!" he wrote (his letters were always in French, since our Spanish resembled his English). "I find myself overcome with emotion!" And in a burst of excitement he exclaimed: "This seems to annihilate all doubts!"

Alas, we heard no more of the "blue-green algae." Herrera was a scientist before all: further experiment disappointed his high hopes; the lightning of chance had not struck him after all. He went back, undismayed, to his patient investigation.

I am sure he died still confident that, if not he, then another man of science would some day prove his theory of universal life and demonstrate its manifestation.

Or if not, then he had yet another daring hope for the far-off future:

"Perhaps some unexpected and unsuspectable discovery will rehabilitate all of mankind, or Plasmogeny may succeed in producing fertilized eggs — synthetic, artificial — from which may come highly perfected human beings, in a future which cannot be dated with certainty. . . . Philosophy will extend life and its problems to the Universe, and perhaps it and Science both will be perfected by artificial men — or by artificial brains."

Olaf Stapledon foresaw those eggs and those artificial brains, and incorporated them both in his cosmic fiction. He foresaw them in despair, Alfonso Herrera in enduring hope:

"Then," he cried, "physical and moral suffering will be extinguished forever — forever!"

Note:

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Here is a story of a child who made a magic wish, and was thereby able to shape his life as he thought he desired it — a subtly cautionary tale, suggesting a new proverb: If wishes were horses, beggars might be trampled underfoot.

The Invisible Wall

by RICHARD BROOKBANK

IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD where a brick house was going up, George built castles of bricks in the sandpile, with steps pressed in moist sand and little mirrors for pools and fountains. Twigs of green made spreading trees, and he got the towers high before they toppled. They made a dry porcelain sound when they fell on each other in the sand. But George always built them up again with great care.

His friend Joe always became impatient and insisted on building too fast, or inventing roads for toy autos into the still courtyards, or he built a volcano out of bricks covered with sand and lit a fire inside so the top smoked.

On this day George had worked out his castle to the great wall which he always put around it, and was digging a deep moat outside the wall, telling stories more to himself than to Joe.

"My mother lives in that tower with a view of the court and fountain and now she looks at the big wall, so strong nobody dares try to come and get in except when she opens the gate."

"And then she sees the old volcano smoking away outside the gate and she gets scared," said Joe.

"No she doesn't. She doesn't even see the volcano because this castle is miles away from it and she's perfectly safe and doesn't worry about anything at all."

Joe got up and went over close to the tower, where he sighted along it with one eye.

"Come here and see if you don't see the old volcano from here, just as plain —"

"That doesn't make a bit of difference!" shouted George. "I say she doesn't see it and she doesn't even know it's there."

"Then she's blind or else she's dumb," said Joe.

George was furious and he took a brick and threw it so hard that when it hit Joe he nearly fell down. But Joe held back the tears and without saying a word he kicked down the tower while George watched in horror. Then he walked off deliberately.

"She wasn't in there when it came down, she was down in the kitchen," George kept repeating. Then he calmed down and built the tower again and smashed the volcano completely. But before he went home he took it all down brick by brick so that there was nothing left and nobody could knock it over while he was gone.

He dreamed that night as usual but this time he was in the castle and hundreds of hopping ogres, trolls, and witches were swarming up the sand to the moat and the wall. When they got nearer he couldn't see them behind the wall and waited, trembling with fear, for the first heads to appear over the top. He waited so long that the dream changed and showed them along the outside of the wall, building ladders and burrowing holes at the base. The sight frightened him so much that he woke up calling and crying and found his mother beside him soothing him with her hand on his forehead, telling him there were no witches and trolls, but only good people in the room, angels and fairies and kindly old seers.

It was recess at school. Avoiding Joe and the others, George wandered uneasily along the playground wall to a bushy corner he knew, where he dived in quickly, finding himself in a kind of protective leafy room with a clean floor of packed earth. Here he could scratch pictures into the ground with a sharp stick, islands and continents and rivers, telling himself stories of wonderful things that happened there.

Yet Joe had always watched where he went and when George wasn't there he had pushed in through the bushes and tried to make out what all the crude lines and fuzzy ciphers meant.

Today he decided to teach George a lesson. He got a gang of boys together and they stole up unnoticed close by where George was playing. It was so quiet they could hear the stick scratching where George was drawing his story.

"I've come all the way across the ocean to see you, King," George was saying softly, "and — and I need men to help me on my way back home." The scratching of the stick stopped as George reflected, utterly absorbed. Joe gave a signal.

With a wild yell of murderous triumph they all pounced in on him at once, and they kept howling with joy while they beat him up. Then the bell rang and they were gone in a flash.

George got up, stiff with pain and shock. He staggered home blindly

with one hand, bright with blood, clapped tight over his nose. His mother wasn't home when he got there so he went straight to his room, crying in bitter rage. When he paused in exhaustion and his aching eyes looked around the room, he thought time was standing still. The unresponsive pieces of furniture, the indifference of his familiar old bed and night table in the plain pale light of afternoon filled him with desolation and wretchedness.

When his mother came at last her consolation seemed thin and not enough, not nearly enough. A kiss, a gentle reproach, and a cool washing. Even when her arms were about him the thought kept with him that it was not enough, she could never make him safe. When he finally lay between the clean fresh sheets the thought of how they had sneaked up on him kept coming back and turning his heart cold inside him. But when he thought how many new times they might do the same thing again, he twisted and turned and his bed grew hot and uncomfortable while the darkness filled up with menacing spots. He turned on the light. "I wonder if I pray and make a strong wish . . ." he said. He was thinking of the angels and old seers that might be in the room.

"I will find something and when I wear it I will have an invisible wall around me," he said, chanting. "I will find it and I will find it tonight, like an Easter egg, where I don't expect it." Then he began to search the room. He looked under the bed, under the dresser, under the radiator, but nothing he saw seemed significant. Then he saw a sewing basket his mother had left on the table and he pawed through the buttons and tangles of blue and pink yarn.

All at once a silver gleam caught his eye. It was a ring. It looked like a small curtain ring, with a little loop of silver on top. He tried it on his left hand and it fit the middle finger perfectly. He was greatly satisfied and went back to his bed.

"When I turn it this way I am surrounded by an invisible wall," he said, "and when I turn it back, the wall is gone." It seemed so convenient and reassuring that he turned the wall on and fell into a deep, quiet sleep.

When he awoke next morning he remembered the wall and turned it off carefully before he got out of bed. He felt a deep, vacant satisfaction with himself, and his mother had to remind him several times to eat or he would be late for school. She kissed him goodbye at the doorstep and watched him around the corner, waving. As soon as she was out of sight he put his books down and carefully turned the little silver loop to where the wall was on.

"Now the wall is all around me," he whispered in toneless sing-song. "It's shut up every which way, above and below." He repeated it seven times, fondly, keeping his fingers crossed and beating time. Then he re-

peated it three times seven times and turned completely around at the end of each phrase. By the time the formula was fulfilled he was at the schoolgrounds, and he had coaxed a lot of courage into himself.

"And only I can reach through it," he muttered as an afterthought.

He saw Joe at the top of the steps leading to the playground.

"My enemy, my enemy!" he thought with a little turn of excitement. Joe's hated familiar outline looked sharp and thrilling against the bright morning sky.

"Yaa-aa phoney Joe!" he yelled; and made a face.

He saw Joe stoop and pick up a stone and take careful aim. He knew he was a good shot. There was no place to hide behind, so he bent double, covering his face with his hands. Then he heard the stone strike, right beside his head, but it made a dry clicking sound like hitting cement and glanced off. Still bent, his heart leaped and thumped and such a wild joy rushed through him that he stumbled to keep his balance.

The wall was really there.

He took his hands away from his face and looked up. A shrill laugh broke from his lips when he saw Joe leaning forwards, squinting as if to see better.

"Can't hurt a flea!" he sang.

Joe stooped again for another stone and flung back his arm to throw. But this time George did not dodge, he only smiled and walked slowly and deliberately towards Joe. He saw the stone speeding at him, it was an odd sensation; then he heard the sharp cement sound again and saw it drop to his feet. Still smiling, he kept on walking toward Joe. But Joe suddenly turned and ran off to the schoolhouse.

When George came into the classroom, still smiling the same derisive smile, he noticed Joe wouldn't look at him. But he didn't care, there were too many wonderful new things to think about. The very classroom was rich with new meaning. The familiar scratches on his desk, etched in the long hours of suspense and tedium, tickled his fingertips pleasantly as he ran his hand over them. Even the dreary smell of oiled floorboards was nice. The teacher pulled down, like a window blind, the same worn map of the Central States, and for once he liked the pale colors. He smiled remembering his old resentments in this dull room: the resentment of the clock with the octagon frame in dark wood and the indifferent slow swing of the pendulum. How the agonizing slowness of the hands had tired him, never seeming to move over the foreign Roman numerals that were too carefully drawn! Then the blackboard that would never ever wear away, would last forever, and the still, vacant air between these things. When he looked at the ring, which seemed to have taken on a new secret sparkle, an intimate thrill warmed him.

"Turned on full!" he muttered. "Good old ring!"

He couldn't wait for recess.

When the bell rang he rushed out with the rest. As soon as they reached the playground, he started throwing stones at the other boys, shouting:

"Sissies! I bet you wet your beds every night! Where's your pretty hair ribbon, hey Joel!"

They stared at first as if they couldn't believe their ears. They gathered into a bundle a little ways away, looking over their shoulders at him.

"Joe's mother's a dirty bitch!" he yelled.

Suddenly they rushed him. One after another they struck the invisible wall and fell away, at first dazed, then incredulous, while George laughed a harsh laugh that hurt his sides.

From then on he relished nothing more than to see someone, goaded beyond endurance, forget the wall and try to get at him.

Only at home did he turn the wall off. But his mother noticed the change. When he came in from school his face was still hot with insolence, and he became more and more restless and fretful in the house. If she asked him to do something he did not wish to do, he just smirked and stared at her.

One cloudy Saturday afternoon when a thick heat filled the house with heavy stale air, George's mother was finishing up vacuuming the rugs in his room when he came in and threw himself onto his bed. His shoes were caked with mud and left two broad smears on the white bedspread.

"Oh how can you do such a thing!" she cried above the whine of the vacuum. "Look at the marks you've made on the clean spread! And your tracks across the rug I just cleaned . . ." She stepped to the door and looked out in the hall.

"And right across the hall rug too! The whole house from the door to here will have those dirty tracks—" She heard a crash behind her and turned to see he had kicked the vacuum across the room. It lay upside down rattling grotesquely against the bare floor.

"What's got into you?" she cried, feeling herself shake with exasperation. "You go right over there and pick that thing up!"

For answer he climbed deliberately back onto his bed, then turned his face toward her and stared, the impudent smirk on his lips. He said something but she couldn't hear him above the whine and rattle of the overturned vacuum. She snatched the cord and yanked it sharply. The plug came out and there was a sudden absolute silence.

"Go to hell, Mother," she heard him say softly, with his queer smile.

She stepped over and struck him across the face. He bounded from his bed and stood looking at her in amazement, she had never struck him before. With his eyes still upon her he slowly turned the ring.

"Hit me again," he screamed at her suddenly, "just hit me again!"

His mother turned and hurried from the room, but he went after her. "Hit me, dirty bird, hurry up and hit me you bitch you bitch!" But she only locked herself in her room while he flung himself against her door, pounding and screaming. His mind flickered red and black in a blaze of fear and anger. A high warning whistled in his head, and the shrill red behind his eyes wanted to burst. He stopped pounding on the door, opened his eyes, and looked at the ring. It was instantly comforting, so comforting that he decided never, ever, to turn the wall off again. He gave the door a last kick of contempt and walked away.

His mother, hearing the kick, knew she had lost him.

George closed his office door and turned the key absently, puzzling over a new problem. It was late in the fall, and the last leaves dropped in a cold rain. Walking toward his rooms, he paused, annoyed that he had forgotten to buy cigarettes. It was the first time he had ever forgotten them, and it was a matter of pride with him that someone had once remarked that he could set his watch by George's comings and goings. He went back to the tobacconist quickly, got the cigarettes and shoved them impatiently in his pocket, turning his back on the man and ignoring the usual remark about the weather. Once he was out in the rain again, the new problem came back to him.

There was somebody, a quiet, soft-eyed girl with exciting high-heeled shoes for whom he would have liked, perhaps, to open the wall. Her name was Olive, and he liked the click of her heels as she moved around the office. Today she had put some papers on his desk with a smile of such warmth and understanding that he had wanted her to be near him all the time. When they talked, he cautiously at first and then with greater confidence, he saw that his life had been empty. There was a happiness here at the edge of every word, a happiness he seemed to learn over again, something he must have forgotten a long time ago.

Standing here on the curb in the rain, he looked across the street to a deserted park. He went over and walked into the center among the black wet trunks of naked trees, looking around carefully to be sure nobody was near. The dampness and the chill gray of evening insinuated themselves into him. He thought of Olive and the dry crisp click of her heels on the linoleum of the office floor. Then he looked at the bright ring and decided: Once more he made sure that no one was near, and then took the loop between his fingers and tried to turn the wall off. But it wouldn't budge. His finger had grown so large under and about the small ring that it could never be turned. Looking at it, he thought he mustn't worry,

there was plenty of time to decide what to do. Then, taking big strides and swinging his arms to get warm, he started back to his rooms.

But he suddenly stopped, holding his hand as if it had been stung. Cautiously he lifted his arm and then snatched it back. The fingers had touched something hard.

It was the inside of the wall, he knew. He had never felt it before.

Could it be getting smaller? he thought. He stood quite still, his arms stiff at his sides, controlling himself while a feeling of oppression and horror swept over him. The air about him tingled with vibrant expectancy, it seemed hard to breathe. Instead of going home he hurried to a jeweler's, careful to take small steps and not to swing his arms.

He went to four different jewelers, asking for a file and insisting he be allowed to use it himself, but none had an instrument that would even scratch the bright metal of the ring. Going home, there was a menace close around him, singing in his ears and in the dead air space between himself and the wall.

"Here's the file of letters you asked for," Olive said, laying it on his desk. "Why, what's the matter? You look sick. . . . is there something I can do?"

"No, just don't bother —" George looked away, then looked at her again. He was trying to think of something to say to keep her there, but no logical reason came to his mind. He knew she somehow understood his need for company, and yet she was so sensitive about intruding. A mere thought could send her away. Why couldn't he just say, "Stay there"? The irritation of indecision was getting on his nerves again. If he snapped at her she'd go away. More than anything he wanted to avoid that. She stood there quietly waiting while he struggled for words.

"Stuffy here," he finally got out, running his finger along the inside of his collar. There was another pause.

"Olive, I — I've got to talk something over with you. No, not here," he said hastily, seeing her nod. "Maybe at my place. Could you come over tonight?"

"Why of course!" she said, with her warm smile.

He leaned back in relief. She could go now, whenever she felt like it. He didn't know what he wanted to say when she came tonight, if anything. But he knew he wanted her there.

Settled comfortably in his easy chair that evening, he knew that now she was coming, everything would somehow turn out all right. He repeated the phrase, "Everything will turn out all right," and then glanced back at the book he held.

"Something has to be done about the wall," he said aloud, looking up again. Something — he knew what — but he kept the thought away and took up the book once more. He was trying to read a page that couldn't get his attention. Over and over he read the same sentences stretching across the page, black and white and devoid of any meaning. There was a noise, a hissing noise at the edge of his consciousness, persistent and depressing. The little room was hot and stuffy. Looking up, he saw that the hissing came from the gas heater at his side. It sounded like a howling tempest caught in a tiny place. He must turn it off. He glanced at the sentences again, but they still worked across the page, saying nothing, nothing at all. Then a few words jumped out:

His mother lived in a fine brick house on a rise in the land. . . .

The sentence held some secret sweetness, he could not tell why. But the air was too hot. He wondered idly was the heater inside the wall? All at once the hissing stopped and there was silence. He started; the gas must have gone off. But he could see the wavering, bright flames in rows of blue. The heater was outside the wall, then. Or had the wall moved in again? Was it still moving in, stealthily, soundlessly? A drop of perspiration tickled and ran down behind his ear. There was no air to breathe, and his ears rang with a high whistling noise like a popcorn wagon. Slowly he lifted his hand, with the bright light of the ring on it, and started to extend his arm, palm outwards. The arm shook. Blind men, he remembered, can sometimes sense bodies with their hands before they touch them. He snatched his hand back, in dread that it might touch the wall. It was nearer, though, he knew. It was closing, contracting softly like a balloon when the air escapes. Tears came to his eyes as he fought for breath. Now if ever it was time to do the only thing there was to do.

He got up quickly and went in to the little kitchenette. He tore off a scrap of newspaper and put it where he could reach it. Then he pressed his left hand against the edge of the drainboard, so that it held all the fingers away except the middle one, which extended submissively across the wood. He wouldn't think. With his right hand, he took a meat cleaver and struck a sharp clean blow. He saw the finger with the ring jump free of his hand and roll across the drainboard. Cold air rushed in at him. There was almost no pain at all. Quickly he turned on the cold water and held his hand under the tap. With his right hand, he groped for the scrap of newspaper without looking, covered the finger with it, and stuffed it in his pocket.

He bound his left hand in a handkerchief, and later he went out in the dark, scraped a bit of earth away, and buried the finger, stamping the earth firm above it.

The wall was gone. But the absence of the wall was almost as palpable as its presence. He felt the breezes lift his hair as he ran back to his room, longing for its small cozy warmth. Sounds broke through to him with a fearful new clangor, as if he had had water in his ears and had now shaken it out. It was not a pleasant sensation.

Back in his room, he locked the door and closed the curtains. Then he went over and closed the door into the kitchenette. The throbbing in his left hand was becoming painful. But Olive would be coming soon, very soon. Almost fearfully he glanced at his watch and saw that it was already time. He hurried over to the door and bent to the keyhole, listening. Somewhere below another door banged, and the sound made him jump. A voice was raised in anger, then silenced. The gas heater hissed in the stillness. Then he heard the sound of high-heeled shoes clicking crisply across the pavement downstairs. A smile spread over his face and he took the key out and put his ear to the keyhole. *Click, click!* And then the sandier sound of feet coming up the stairs. They reached the first landing, *click, click!* and then came upstairs again. His smile faded abruptly and his heart pounded as the footsteps grew louder and louder. He put his hand tight over the keyhole, but the steps still came on louder and louder. He bit his lip, shut his eyes tight, and waited as a memory floated up in his mind. He saw Joe's stone fly at him, heard it crack against the cement, and felt again the first thrill of the protecting wall. There was no protection now. *Click, click!* On his landing. There was a knock at the door close to his head, so loud that he slipped to the floor in terror and clapped his bandaged hand over his mouth to hide the sound of his heavy breathing.

"George!" came her voice.

He stayed on the floor, not daring to move, trying to control his breathing.

"George, George!" Her voice was sharper. Then another longer fit of terrible knocking that seemed to go on for minutes.

"Go away! Get out, you silly chippy!" he finally cried in a strangled voice.

There was silence on the other side of the door. It lasted so long he began to wonder if she had tiptoed away. Then suddenly *click, click!* and the shoes descending the stairs, growing fainter.

George got to his feet and stumbled over to his chair. He heaved into it and covered his face with his hands, letting out a long sigh of inexpressible relief.

"I haven't really lost the wall," he muttered half aloud. "She couldn't get in, at least."

Here is a story that makes its own point too sharply (and subtly) for us to hint at that point in an introduction. Let's just say that this is a sensitive tale of the Enlightened Future's attempt to solve a problem of today and all our yesterdays.

Command Performance

by KAY ROGERS

BIX AND HIS MOTHER had to wait while Landlord got the recorded messages from the phone. That was all right; Landlord was nice about it.

"Expecting an important call," he explained. But when he went to his desk and reached for a lease form, he looked up sharply.

"I kind of forgot," he said. "You're the new folks from Relocation. Guess I gotta use the new type form for you people."

What did he mean by that? Was that the kind of thing you ought to get on the recorder? Bix saw his mother smile nervously. Neither of them *knew* how the P.T. law worked, nor what to expect when you were relocated and assigned to a Housing Unit.

Bix glared at Landlord. Landlord, ponderously unaware, stretched down to the bottom drawer of his desk. When he straightened, a wave of rich color washed the thick bulge over his collar. It might be from the bending, but maybe he was trying to get away with something and not sure he'd make it.

"I got on my minicam and recorder," Bix said. He held up his wrist. "Did you know Relocation issues it free, Mom?"

It was much too loud and defiant for the tiny office. Mom, who always took things easier than Bix did, breathed his name reprovingly and Landlord looked up again.

"You got no call to wear it around here, son," he said mildly. "No one else does. We're law abiding folks. And we ain't got money to throw away on fines. Now, ma'am, you sign here and here."

He blotted the signatures, folded the leases. Handing one to Mom, he smiled at Bix. It was shopworn, used on many tenants; suddenly, Bix felt good. Everything was going to be swell; he was sure of it.

"Boy about fourteen in Unit Green," Landlord said. "You got Blue,

right next door. You two should hit it off." He leaned back in his chair. "Bet there's lots of things a boy like you ain't seen, living in Relocation all the while."

"Yeah; I guess so," Bix said regretfully. He was the only guy he'd ever heard of who'd never seen the Moon Rocket take off — imagine that in 1990 when you could reach Mars from the Moon Station! "The Moon Port isn't far from here, is it? Jeeps, I'd like to see the Rocket take off!"

"It ain't far," Landlord said. He smiled indulgently. "The Clays, the folks in Green, got a married daughter down there. They visit quite often. Wouldn't surprise me they asked you along, you and young Sam get to be friends." He stood up. "Well, ma'am, I think you'll like it here."

"I'm sure we will," Bix's mother said warmly.

She fooled Bix too; he was so used to her believing things were the way they looked. So later, when they were getting settled in Unit Blue with its clean, shining plastic walls, she surprised him by insisting:

"I don't care what he said, Bix. I want you to wear that thing. I don't think anyone will say or do anything, there's the law, but —"

"But what, Mom?" Bix said, puzzled.

"The law forbids discrimination in word and deed," she said, half quoting. "But things like that take time. Education would be better, it seems to me. So don't expect too much."

Bix wished she wouldn't worry so. He set his battered little radio on the bedside table. Watching him, Mom smiled suddenly.

"We can get a visio now, dear."

That would be swell. Only a thing like the takeoff, Bix wanted to be there, on the spot. "Hey!" he exclaimed. "What did you mean, don't expect too much?"

Jeeps, they'd waited years in Relocation while the P.T. was dreamed up and put to work; while the Decentralization Program got going and started resettling everybody —

"Gee, Mom," he said slowly. "If anyone says or does anything you know I can get it on my cam-rec and take it to the Control. And I'll get part of the fine for reporting it."

"It works both ways, remember," she warned. "And you be absolutely sure, Bix, before you record anything. The law wasn't meant to be abused."

Bix felt relief. She was just worried in general, there was nothing definite.

"Everything's gonna be swell," he said, confident again.

It seemed he must be right. His mother relaxed, she began to hum the old melodies about the house, her trips to Food Center took longer as she stopped to chat. But she still insisted Bix wear his cam-rec. So he had it on, the third morning, when he met Sam Clay.

Bix saw him first from the bedroom window. Sam, gangling, sandy-haired, moved slowly over the huge circle of the Unit lawn on which all the homes faced, kicking and peering at the grass.

There was a Moon flight next week; Bix had been hoping he'd meet Sam. But it wasn't solely that which made him open the window.

"Lose something?" he called with genuine friendliness.

Sam looked up. "Aw, an old . . ." His glance full on Bix; just for a moment, he froze, his mouth open. "Lost m'watch," he mumbled finally and went on kicking through the short grass.

When Bix went out after breakfast, he was still there, fooling around with an anti-grav belt. Turning slow somersaults six feet above the ground. Bix watched enviously. Mom had set her foot down. "They're too new to be safe," she'd told Bix.

"Find your watch?" he asked Sam. Jeeps, he'd like to try that belt!

Sam hung horizontal and inspected Bix slowly. "Oh, sure." He blinked. Twice. "You look funny — hey, you got a cam-rec!" He snickered. "Heck, guy, you don't need 'em around here, you know it? But you still look funny to me!" That annoying double blink! "Upside down, that is."

Then he smiled at Bix. "So you're the new family in Blue! I'll have to tell Ma when she gets home."

"My name's Bix." But Sam spun into a somersault, didn't see his extended hand.

"I'm Sam Clay. I s'pose you're from Relocation."

"Yeah. I was even born there — what's so funny about that?"

"Nothin'. Anybody can be born anywhere, I reckon. I just thought . . ."

"Say, you ever see the Moon Rocket take off?"

"Everybody has." Sam was contemptuous. "You mean you've never? What did you do in Relocation? Listen to the radio?"

"Sure, I did," Bix said. Casually, he added, "We're getting a visio now."

"Now? Huh!" Sam landed skillfully and switched off the belt. "I reckon you'd like to try my belt," he said carefully. "Only Ma says I'm not to let anybody take it unless I'm around. And I gotta go in now." His eyes flicked towards Bix's wrist again.

"It's okay," Bix said, surprised. "See you."

He looked back when he reached the red dome of Amusement Unit and Sam was still spinning lazily above the Unit lawn.

He was full of tricks like that, Bix discovered. There had been some selfish guys in Relocation, but Sam's blinking pauses, his senseless snicker were new, puzzling. How did you get to be friends with a guy like that?

He shouldn't start Mom worrying again. But time was running out. The afternoon before takeoff day, Bix lingered in the kitchen.

"Mom," he began carefully, "do you still think I shouldn't expect too much?"

"Why darling, I do believe I was wrong," she said. "Everyone's been so nice! No one has said anything to you, I hope."

"No," Bix had to admit. But there was tomorrow — and Sam and he certainly weren't friends.

"That's fine!" Mom's eyes creased into the familiar heavy folds when she smiled. "Now, Bix, I don't want you fretting over that Rocket." Her smile became mischievous and she deliberately changed the subject. "Have you met Mr. Bernstein? He isn't exactly prejudiced, but he's certainly —"

"He gets kind of sore if you help him," Bix said.

"That's because he's crippled, dear. Helping him makes him more aware of it. Though he shouldn't take it that way; no one means to rub it in."

"Yeah," Bix said. "But, look, Mom, tomorrow —"

Zingg, the signal panel interrupted softly.

Mom's hands flew to her apron. "Oh, Bix, that's Mr. Burroughs, the Unit Manager. He promised to call. You take him into the living room; I'll be right in." She reached into the freezer for some bottled Moonblend.

Mr. Burroughs, ruddy, stocky, fairly bounced into the house. When Mom came in, he took her hand and beamed impartially upon her, Bix and the sparkling newness of Unit Blue.

"Very nice. Very nice!" he said. "Don't you find it so?"

"Indeed we do," Mom said gravely. "This is my son, Bix."

"Ah, Bix," Mr. Burroughs said. "And are you making lots of new friends?" Right away, he spotted the cam-rec. "Quite right to wear it," he nodded. "I'd never be without one if I were a Jew or Negro or Martian."

Bix didn't hear the slightest inflection.

"So refreshing!" Mr. Burroughs approved the Moonblend Bix's mother offered him. He turned back to Bix.

"Now, young man, you take prejudice! It's certainly sensible to tax it as the luxury it is, in this day and age, instead of making people pay for the right to own visios, anti-gravs or sports rockets. You're making them pay for what holds up progress instead of taxing what proves we've got it."

He laughed jovially, sipped and leaned back in his chair. "And we've put the Golden Rule on a cash basis, you might say. Perhaps I'm cynical, but I'm afraid it appeals to more people that way."

Bix shifted uneasily. "Jeeps," he ventured. "It is dopy that the same people who're smart enough to build Moon Rockets and reach Mars — stuff like that — have to have a Prejudice Tax."

Mr. Burroughs held up a soft, well-tended hand.

"Technology always outstrips psycho-sociology," he pontificated. "The P.T. law will close the gap."

"I would have thought education, instead, perhaps" . . . Bix's mother began timidly.

"You're absolutely right!" Mr. Burroughs boomed. "But there wasn't time! You understand, no one thought to find Mars behind us in technology. When we discovered this, well, there was a mass reaction, unfortunate, but quite understandable, which lumped Martians with our other minorities in one discriminated-against class."

Again, no inflection. Bix looked at his mother. She followed Mr. Burroughs' spreading of his hands as if she expected to see the fabled Cloth of Wisdom actually displayed before her.

"As your son said, it was too much of a paradox. Something had to be done. And something was done!" He smiled, proud to extend this wonderful, blanketing protection of the P.T. to them.

Well, he sure knew all the words. And he believed them, so you shouldn't grudge him his righteousness.

"Now if there is anything I can do —" Mr. Burroughs rose tentatively.

"Why, Bix wants awfully to see the takeoff tomorrow at the Moon Port." Mom ignored his stricken eyes and kept on calmly. "If you know of anyone in the Unit who's planning to go, if it won't put you to a lot of trouble —"

"Not at all." Mr. Burroughs was genuinely pleased to know there was something more he could arrange for them. "I like my Unit to be one big family." With a last fatherly beam, he departed.

Jeeps! But you couldn't say it to Mom's pleased, expectant face.

"Thanks!" Bix said gruffly.

He couldn't help thrilling in anticipation. But in the morning, when Mom archly suggested he go out and talk to Sam, he went reluctantly, still eager but ashamed to be.

"Hi," he said guardedly to Sam. He sniffed. "Hey, what smells so good?"

"Ma's baking cookies to take to Mary. Real cookies. They ain't like the stuff from Food Center. I s'pose you never tasted real cookies either at Relocation."

"No," Bix admitted. "Are they good?"

"Good?" Sam snorted. "Say, you wouldn't believe —"

"Sam!" A voice shrilled from Unit Green. "You, Sam!"

"Come on," Sam invited, grinning. Bix followed, deliberately casual.

That wonderful spicy warm-brown odor was stronger inside. Jeeps, those cookies must be super! Bix followed Sam to the sun-flooded kitchen where Mrs. Clay presided over her cookies.

When she caught sight of another figure behind her son, she automatically reached toward her hair. "Why, it's . . . Bix!" And her hand dropped. The string of hair, abandoned, dragged as before.

"Yeah, it's . . . Bix. You know . . . This is Ma." Sam propped himself against the wall and waited.

"I'm glad to know you, Mrs. Clay," Bix said carefully, noticing how her eyes avoided his face and dropped swiftly to his wrist.

"I've never used it," he confided impulsively.

"Hmpf!" She brushed the tip of her nose with a floury hand. "Well, I always think it's better if folks know their . . ." She paused. "Oh, it ain't hard for me to remember. But it's awful hard for some folks. Take my daughter, Mary, now."

She glanced at the clock. "You get along now, Sam. If you think you want to see that Rocket go off again."

"It takes off, Ma." He retreated a few steps and drooped against the freezer. "Bix, he ain't never seen a takeoff!"

"That so?" Fleetinglly, Mrs. Clay looked at Bix. "Now, I was tellin' you about Mary. There's a girl always has spoke her mind. She ain't malicious, she just purely forgets."

Mrs. Clay got a plastibox and snapped it open. Her hands moved over the cookies, selecting and packing.

"Gonna tell Bix some more about Mary, Ma?"

"You hush, Sam Clay! Didn't I tell you to get along?"

Sam didn't stir. Puzzled, Bix looked from one to the other. It didn't look like Mrs. Clay meant to invite him along. But Sam had asked him into the house. He'd never done that before.

"I just want to show you how hard it is for some folks, you see," Mrs. Clay began in a sort of whine. "Now, Mary, she wrote me last week how she went into Martin's with Bertha. There was a partic'lar dress Bertha wanted awful bad. Green dress it was, Mary said. With one of them Martian vines sprangled all over it."

Again she paused. Bix drew a deep breath, smelling the warm deliciousness of the cookies.

"Well, a young chit had hold of the skirt, a-lookin' and a-lookin'. She had a nasty, sallow skin, rough and leathery as a . . ." Mrs. Clay's wise smile was careful on Bix's tightening face.

"Now you know she'd be a fright in green! Bertha, she's a redhead and she'd look just sweet! That's what made her mind so bad. So to make her feel better, Mary, she up and said, 'Never mind, honey. That's a — dress, for sure.' " Mrs. Clay sighed. "Just not thinking, poor lamb. But that chit had a recorder and she got the word, which you notice I didn't

repeat, and Mary had to phone Joe for money to pay the fine. Poor Joe! 'Course he can deduct it, but it runs him a lot of money, Mary being so unthinking!"

She peered at Bix, something deadly gleaming in her muddy eyes. "Want some cookies, Bix?"

There were a few left, broken or burned-edged. "No, thanks," Bix said.

"Well, you're welcome to them, I'm sure. Now, you Sam, you skip! It's getting awful late."

"Bix, he ain't never seen a takeoff," Sam repeated. Fascinated, he stared at Bix.

"I heard you! And I been meanin' right along to ask him." She faced Bix. "You want to go with us? Ride out to Mary's?"

"Thanks. I . . . I got to help Mom."

"Well, now!" Mrs. Clay exclaimed. "Well, now, ain't that too bad, Sam?" The gleam in her eyes was sharper, triumphant.

As Bix stepped off Green's porch, he heard their stifled laughter. And Sam saying, "Well, you asked him, Ma. You sure enough did."

Bix slunk into Unit Blue. But Mom wasn't there; she was probably at Food Center. Bix was glad. He wouldn't have to explain right away why he wasn't headed for the Moon Port with the Clays. He hoped he could think of a good reason.

He went into his bedroom, stared at the plastic walls. So new, so *smooth* — after Relocation. Yeah, it was sure swell, all right. Be too bad to spoil it for Mom. Sure swell. Sure swell. It spun in his mind until the meaning was lost.

Then he heard the harried, futile buzzing and looked at the window. Somehow a bee had gotten in. Mom would have to adjust the exterminator screens.

Bix watched the bee patiently assail the glass barrier, which baffled her more than the opaque walls. At last, he crossed and touched the buttons which opened the window and turned the screen entirely off.

You could *learn* to understand a poor, dumb bee.



Recommended Reading

by THE EDITORS

WE JUST don't understand the anthology situation. We've heard publishers admit that some, even some of the best, have been commercial failures; we've heard readers say that they're sick of them; we know that reviewers are becoming completely numb — and still they come . . . !

The greatest number of s. f. anthologies in a single previous year was seventeen in 1953. In the first five months of 1954 there have been sixteen! And we know of so many more now in progress that the year's total seems sure to go over two dozen. Our desks are stacked; we'll confess, with as yet unread collections; but here's a report on five of the most recent crop.

The only one that we can recommend without reservations is the shortest and (agrecably) the cheapest: Judith Merrill's *HUMAN?* (Lion, 25¢). To our minds, Miss Merrill's taste is just about impeccable, and readers of this magazine are sure to relish anything she edits. None of these fifteen peculiarly human treatments of non-human life forms has been anthologized before (though seven of them have appeared previously in book form); the authors — Asimov, Collier, Leiber, Seabright, Sturgeon and others equally good — adhere to high standards of literary skill and of pure storytelling; and the editorial commentary is delightfully adroit.

The others are a mixed bag: Sam Moskowitz's *EDITOR'S CHOICE IN SCIENCE FICTION* (McBride, \$3.50) has the best new anthological theme in years: a selection by editors of the outstanding stories which hasty anthologists have neglected to reprint from their magazines. But the editors' choices (and Mr. Moskowitz's choice of editors) are so capricious that the book falls far short of the stature it might have had. A good modern story by Clifton and Apostolides (*Astounding*) and valuable period pieces by Eando Binder (*Amazing*) and Robert W. Chambers (*Famous Fantastic Mysteries*) deserve your attention.

H. L. Gold, like us, is not among Moskowitz's chosen choosers; but, again like us, he has brought out his own book-selection of stories from his magazine: *THE SECOND GALAXY READER OF SCIENCE FICTION* (Crown, \$3.50). It's by far the year's longest anthology, and a comprehensive rather than a selective job, about half of which is already familiar from various reprintings elsewhere. Much of the unreprinted work is good, and some — particu-

larly by Damon Knight, J. T. McIntosh and Evelyn E. Smith — is excellent; but you'll get better value out of investing your \$3.50 in a year's subscription to the magazine itself.

At the opposite pole from the familiarity of Gold's collection lie two anthologies of stories never published before in any form: August Derleth's *TIME TO COME* (Farrar, Straus & Young, \$3.50) and Raymond J. Healy's *9 TALES OF SPACE AND TIME* (Holt, \$3.50). The Derleth book, largely by the new generation of young writers, lacks little save excitement: its twelve entries are publishable enough magazine stories, without that plus-value which permanent library form demands. The one wondrous exception is a dazzling little satire by Miss Smith again, which is just about worth the price of the book. Healy, who created this type of non-reprint anthology with his memorable *NEW TALES OF SPACE AND TIME* in 1951, has like Derleth come up, this time, with a book chiefly noteworthy for one story: in this instance the first new fiction since 1939 by John W. Campbell, Jr. The return to the typewriter of the man who as author foreshadowed and as editor shaped the whole development of modern science fiction would be a major event in any case; it's doubly so when the story is as admirable as this fine study in interstellar cultural conflicts. The other eight stories include one by each of us (in which cases you're the reviewer), a charming fable by R. Bretnor, an uneven sequel by Kris Neville to his well-remembered *Bettyann*, and four makeweights which fall regrettably below earlier standards of Healyan editing.

Two excerpted reprints of anthologies are also at hand. About a third of Groff Conklin's 1952 *OMNIBUS OF SCIENCE FICTION* has appeared in England as *STRANGE TRAVELS IN SCIENCE FICTION* (Grayson & Grayson, 9/6); this selective version is much more representative of Mr. Conklin's good taste than the overcrowded original, and is warmly commended for your library shelves. The 1946 Healy-McComas anthology, *ADVENTURES IN TIME AND SPACE*, is (Boucher speaking solo on this book) *the* basic s. f. collection: the one anthology unarguably essential to every reader. The paperback *SELECTIONS* from it (Pennant, 25¢) amount to one-sixth of the original, and still make a sizable book: eight novelets and shorts by Heinlein, van Vogt, Padgett and such, all from *Astounding* in the years 1938 to 1944 and admirably typifying that Golden Age.

But recent years are producing new authors quite as exciting as those Golden Age giants, as is evidenced by three books of short stories. Robert Sheckley's *UNTOUCHED BY HUMAN HANDS* (Ballantine, \$2.50 and 35¢) is as brightly individual and entrancing a group of science-fantasies as we've seen in some time — and from an author who has only barely begun his career! Richard Matheson's *BORN OF MAN AND WOMAN* (Chamberlain, \$3)

evinces an equally striking young talent in a more unevenly edited volume, containing too many familiar stories and a clinker or two — but still a book well worth owning. F&SF readers, who know Matheson and Sheckley well, should welcome discovering another splendidly off-beat mind in Roald Dahl's *SOMEONE LIKE YOU* (Knopf, \$3.50). Winner of Mystery Writers of America's Edgar for its subtly devastating murder stories, this volume also contains two biting science-fantasies, plus a few unclassifiable gems (such as that perfect story, *Taste*) — the whole belonging on your shelves somewhere in the Beerbohm-Collier-Saki section.

Novels are less rewarding than shorts this month; and the best of them (if you are a line-drawer) belong to "pure" fantasy rather than science. Manning Coles's *BRIEF CANDLES* (Doubleday, \$3) is a quiet farce of two Victorian ghosts at large in Paris, reminding you, perhaps, a little of TOPPER, a little of *Unknown Worlds*, a little of E. Nesbitt — and in any event, more fun than any light fantasy since Kem Bennett's *THE FABULOUS WINK*. Equally lighthearted and almost equally entertaining is Murray Leinster's *GATEWAY TO ELSEWHERE* (Ace, 35¢), a fine foolish romantic adventure in a world in which *THE 1001 NIGHTS* is a history textbook. This Ace double-volume also contains a reprint of one of van Vogt's three top novels, *THE WEAPON SHOPS OF ISHER*. For grislier fantasy, John Metcalfe's novelet *THE FEASTING DEAD* (Arkham, \$2.50) is a bit more conventional than Metcalfe's masterly complexities of three decades ago, but still highly welcome in a period when literate supernatural horror is so rare.

In stricter (at least nominally) science fiction, Robert Crane's *HERO'S WALK* (Ballantine, \$2.50 and 35¢) is a consistently well-written, often intelligent, yet largely trite and lifeless novel of politics-as-usual in the face of invasion from space. Crane may well be a valuable addition to the field as he develops more originality. Louis de Wohl's *THE SECOND CONQUEST* (Lippincott, \$3) is an attempt at Catholic theological s. f. in the school of C. S. Lewis . . . and it's hard to say whether your Catholic editor or your agnostic editor more thoroughly dislikes the book for the banality of its fiction and the rank incompetence of its "science." Murray Leinster's *THE BLACK GALAXY* (Galaxy, 35¢) is an ultimately wild and crude space opera, which seems as though it could not possibly have come from the same hand as so many first-rate science-fantasies.

There's better value this time in reprint s. f. novels: Arthur C. Clarke's 1952 *SANDS OF MARS* (Pocket Books, 25¢), a warmly written documentary almost equal to *PRELUDE TO SPACE*; and Cyril Judd's 1952 *OUTPOST MARS* (Dell, 25¢), which combines a picture of the hardships of colonization with a neat detective-puzzle in genetics. Also available as a reprint: Major

Donald E. Keyhoe's *FLYING SAUCERS FROM OUTER SPACE* (PermaBooks, 25¢), incomparably the most restrained and rational of the numerous "saucer" books and well worth the attention of the most skeptical.

For the devoutly non-skeptical, L. Sprague de Camp's *LOST CONTINENTS* (Gnome, \$5) should be required reading — not that it deals with saucers, but that it presents such a marvelous and terrifying history of the human will-to-believe, even in the face of all factual evidence, as exemplified in the persistent cults of Atlantis, Lemuria and Mu. Mr. de Camp takes this wanton credulity very much to heart, almost as a personal affront; but if his earnestness means somewhat too sober a treatment of the subject, it also means magnificently detailed research and a book fully equipped with proper notes, bibliography and index (an increasingly rare phenomenon!).

The scholar in the science-fantasy field, and even the general reader, should welcome two recent amateur contributions to research. Bradford M. Day's *AN INDEX ON THE WEIRD & FANTASTICA IN MAGAZINES* (\$2; order from the author, 127-01 116th Ave., South Ozone Park 20, N. Y.) gives complete contents-listings on *Weird Tales* and its allied magazines, details on all fantasy in *Argosy* and other Munsey publications — in short, very nearly every pulp fantasy-story not listed in Donald B. Day's *INDEX TO THE SCIENCE FICTION MAGAZINES*. Donald H. Tuck's *A HANDBOOK OF SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY* (\$1.50; order from Howard DeVore, 4705 Weddel St., Dearborn, Mich.) is a sort of index to everything connected with the field: authors, editors, magazines, anthologies (with complete tables of contents), books (with a complete listing of all paperbacks so far published), fan activities, and heaven knows what else. It's astonishing how much information is crammed into small compass here; even though the un-proofread mimeographing contains a fair number of errors (starting on p. 1 with "Ackerman, Forest J."), this handbook seems a must for neophytes, and useful even to old hands.

Much the best of the Spring books for younger readers is Lee Correy's *STARSHIP THROUGH SPACE* (Holt, \$2.50), a novel dedicated to Heinlein and coming very close to Heinleinesque verisimilitude in space-action (with a noble space-traveling cat!) Philip St. John's *ROCKETS TO NOWHERE* (Winston, \$2) is one of the better recent items in the Winston series, with a curious notion of an "invisible" space station and some sharp melodrama developed from our current trend toward the Security State. There's another unstressed political warning for teen-agers in T. Morris Longstreth's *TIME FLIGHT* (Macmillan, \$2.75), weak as a time-travel story, but first-rate as an adventure novel of Salem under the domination of Cotton Mather.

We've brought you earlier some brief pieces by Doris P. Buck; now, with this longer story, we should tell you something about her. Mrs. Buck is a housewife (in Alexandria, Va.), a "semi-professional" actress, and a writer of more varied professionalism than any other of our contributors save Miriam Allen deFord. "I take in writing," she tells us, "as some women take in wash"; and she has hand-launched — in addition to fantasy stories — pieces for trade papers, fillers for the New Yorker, juveniles, one-act plays, radio scripts, and a number of factual articles for travel journals and women's magazines, with improbable titles ranging from America's Pocket Dolomites to Has Your House Circulation Trouble? It may be this background of fact-writing that enables her to be so detailedly convincing in this study of tanktown prophecy . . . and the terrors that can attend even the most hardheadedly fraudulent attempts to scry into the future.

Two-Bit Oracle

by DORIS P. BUCK

LIFE IS HARD in this Thracian temple. If you think that as a soothsayer you would be better fed than in the village, that under our roof you would be dryer than under thatch, you are right. But that is only part of the story.

My last assistant left for Delphi after I had done all an oracle-priest could do to train him. I would not want you to leave after I have worked with you for about a year. Better to understand the disadvantages now. They are many, my young friend, many. The head priestess, Amasara, and I are the only professionals in this oracle. For the rest, we work with villagers.

Do you know what that means? It means you will have to be quick to cover up the inevitable mistakes. You will need the patience that built the Pyramids. Above all, you will need a heart that won't break from discouragement if you deal with a girl like Rhodis.

I had had no trouble getting her — a wretched little orphan — to come here. She must be about fifteen, though she does not know exactly. At first I thought she was glad to change her rags for embroidery — but it was more than that.

She would grind up colored stones and smear them on herself, looking

old as a sibyl or rosy-fingered as dawn. She put on purple, bound sandals on her feet — and in her mind became Queen Hecuba. Sometimes she was a terrified sacrifice, dragged to the altar. Or Eurydice, down in hell, wailing for Orpheus. I could not have stopped Rhodis from this play if I had wanted to. And of course I encouraged her.

Most village girls deliver an oracle as if they had just learned it by heart — which of course they have. Rhodis had more possibilities. Give her an idea and she would put it into her own words. With a girl like that, I decided to take a risk. The first day that she ever sat on the tripod-throne, I gave her one of the biggest cases we ever handled — a king. He had made journeys to Delphi and Dodona. I could not expect him to listen to a wooden-faced amateur. So that morning I coached Rhodis in what, as the voice of the god, she would be expected to say. It was a great honor, as you can see. She disappointed me by becoming almost hysterical.

I rather pride myself on the way I manage hysteria. There is a good deal of it here, even with our most stolid girls. I ignored everything Rhodis said, and when she found no one noticed her, of course she became a great deal calmer. Then I told her that she was to handle a couple of other cases after the king. I made up my mind about those on the spur of the moment. You see I knew, from considerable experience, that one can capitalize on hysteria. The girl's excitement, her tension, carry over to the people who hear her.

But when I stood in the darkness of the temple chamber with a young assistant, I had a bad moment. I knew the king was kneeling before the steps of the throne, and in the darkness I thought of everything that could go wrong, from Rhodis's forgetting completely what she must say to her laughing instead of groaning when thunder rumbled. I was taking a great chance.

I heard our cymbals clash. Then three notes sounded from the deep-toned gong. A shaft of cold white light fell upon Rhodis, who was pale as the light itself. Her hand went to her throat as if she were afraid the muscles in it would not work. I stood there in the darkness beside the young priest, hoping — hoping —

Rhodis found her tongue suddenly. She intoned: "I am the voice of the God, the God-who-dwells-in-darkness. I am his voice. You may question."

She was wonderful. Even I could almost believe in a god, the way she said it.

The shaft of light grew wider till I could see the king too, in his purple and gold. Most of the girls here would have gawked at him, but Rhodis looked quietly over his head. We heard him tell her that barbarians had fallen upon his people, overwhelming his archers by sheer numbers. Now

they were beneath the walls of his city. Though his voice was deep and clear, I knew he was afraid. Rhodis's tense white face had done that.

"Will the God be merciful?" he asked. "Will he turn back the invaders before the city gates?"

Rhodis only said, "The God is angry."

"Angry?" he questioned, while I gave the signal for a low rumble of thunder. He began to tell what a good king he had been, how justly he had ruled, how he opened the royal granary in famines and gave his people wheat and barley.

Rhodis repeated, "The God is angry." The king started to speak, but she interrupted. "I see a ruler of the people. He lies bleeding in a little room. A secret room. I see —"

Her voice broke, and I wondered if after that splendid beginning she would not be able to finish. I helped her with a clap of thunder that sounded like the end of the world. Then there was stillness. It seemed unending. It became something a man could hardly stand. Certainly the king could not stand it. He mumbled that his brother had died after one single stab; he had not given him a slow painful death.

Rhodis came in quickly. She had not lost her voice at all; she had been building up her effect. "But the stench of blood is in the God's nostrils. Therefore the God punishes with war. In his time he will send pestilence." She paused. Though her eyes were apparently not on the king, I could tell that she noticed a big blue vein throb by his temple. She watched him rest his hand on the ground, where no one could tell whether or not it trembled. She said in a voice that was almost kind, "Perhaps, perhaps even now the God might be merciful."

I let thunder rumble again, faintly.

The king muttered, "What would the God ask of me?"

She told him simply, as I had suggested, "The God-who-dwells-in-darkness has looked upon his temple. Rains pour in where the roof has fallen. But if he saw a roof of Cyprian bronze above his image, enduring bronze where the shingles rot —"

"Not bronze." The king was practical. "Cedar."

Beyond him in the darkness I chanted with my assistant, "A roof of bronze, of Cyprian bronze."

"Perhaps," Rhodis whispered, "the God might be merciful. Perhaps —" She let the whisper die. Her head sank on her breast. Her hands hung lax. She hardly moved her lips when she said, "The God has spoken."

Nobody heard the two light taps I gave — nobody but the worker I had hidden. It seemed a miracle when the hall began to fill with light. We drew aside the curtains. The king paced out.

I waited a full minute. Then did we bustle! My assistant rolled up the carpet on which royalty knelt; underneath was a simple rush mat for the next poor fool. I quickly readjusted the curtains; if we had more metal rings for them, I would not have to work so hard at these times.

Rhòdis stayed in her place, of course. But she opened one eye and whispered, "Did I do it right?"

I nodded.

"Oh," she gasped, "I was so frightened."

I should have remembered her hysteria earlier in the day. I ought to have concentrated on the girl, not on details like curtains. But I was in a hurry. When she asked, "Suppose the king hadn't believed me?" I said, "People believe anything," and went on with my work.

"And," my assistant added, "we have the dirt in our files; who killed who and all the scandals."

That lad was always dropping into waterfront slang, taking away the dignity of the oracle. He came here — like me — from an Ionian seaport he had left in something of a hurry.

Rhòdis ignored his crude expression. She asked, "What will happen to the king?"

"Depends on what Amasara can get from him," said my young priest. "If it's enough, our revered High Priestess will have you scare the living daylights out of those barbarians and send them home. Their chieftains are in the court now. The king knows. He'll be reasonable about the roof. But while he and Amasara haggle, you might as well do something for a farmer's wife who's been waiting two hours."

"You know the one," I explained. "The mother of a crippled boy. Tell her he'll be all right."

Rhòdis drooped at that. "Could I — Could I skip the next one?"

I shook my head. "Now, now, now, suppose we all wanted to handle only big cases — a king, a delegation of barbarians. How'd we keep the pot boiling?" I gave her knee a fatherly pat. "Remember," I slipped into waterfront argot myself, "we're a little two-bit oracle trying to keep out of the red. A king doesn't consult us every day. We can't pass up a thing."

My assistant snorted that she must think she was good, holding out for a bigger cut. And her first day too!

"No!" she cried. "No! It's not that."

Naturally we looked puzzled.

Rhòdis said in a shaky voice, "The boy won't ever walk, will he?"

We admitted he would not, but pointed out an important fact she overlooked: We got a drachma every so often for keeping up the mother's spirits.

She planted her little sandaled feet and shut her lips firmly.

Now was the moment to give her a glimpse of my philosophy. "See here, aren't you doing that farmer's wife a favor, making her happier? People think they love truth. They really love a comforting pack of lies. Tell them what they want to hear."

"I can't lie to her," said Rhodis.

"And you can't go temperamental, not on a day like this." My assistant was sharp.

Rhodis looked at her gold-shod feet. She avoided our eyes. "I can't," she whispered.

"Why not?"

She pleaded the silk of her robe and hung her head.

"Because I'm —"

"You're what?"

"Afraid." We could hardly hear her.

My man exploded. In fact he made quite a speech about girls with stage fright.

"That isn't what I'm — afraid of."

We were so surprised we stood stock still and looked at her. "No? Then what is it?"

She had gone white again. She hugged herself in her thin silk and looked hardly bigger than a child as she whispered, "The God."

We roared with laughter.

"Who makes the thunder?" I asked.

"You do. You do."

"And the darkness?" I even added. "You know about the cymbals and the gongs and the light effects?"

"Yes," she admitted.

"Look," I said reasonably, sensing the next attack of hysterics on its way, "nobody who works here has believed in a god for over a hundred years. Besides, if a god could kill, I would have died long ago."

"It's different for you," she insisted. "You never believed. But I did — in my village. I shall be punished as a priestess was once — with visions too terrible for a mortal to bear. I shall die mad."

"Can't argue with that type." My assistant (Birdbrain I called him) caught her wrist to twist it. I stopped that.

"She's tired," I explained. "She has a right to be. Look at the way she played up to the king. No false starts. No backtracking, Dearie," I even forgot to talk like a soothsayer, "you've got that certain something. If we'd had you when Alexander came here, we'd be on the map now. Just, you forget about that mad priestess. She was nutty to start with."

Birdbrain made some silly remarks about arm-twisting.

I ignored him. It was natural for her to be jumpy, I said, especially as it was her first time. Did she want a rest?

She nodded.

I advised her to lean back, breathe deeply, and take a few minutes to pull herself together. I almost had to push Birdbrain to get him out. He scowled but he went with me. At the curtains I paused. "Forget that farmer's wife till we go to the grove and back. But be yourself when we get in again —"

"— or else," said Birdbrain before he too slipped through the curtains.

I suspected what would happen while we were supposed to be in the grove. Of course we hadn't really gone; we both had our eyes at peepholes. I must say I've seldom enjoyed myself more.

At first the girl sat rigid. Then she ran across the hall, flung the drapery aside, and disappeared. In a couple of minutes she returned, pulling the waiting country woman into the room.

"They never did it like this before," the farmer's wife said. She frowned so hard at Rhodis there were deep lines between her eyes.

Rhodis did not notice. She laid a finger on her own lips. "Hush! We have only a minute."

"I had music the other time," the woman complained.

"Listen —"

The farmer's wife felt for a stray lock and tucked it under her new fillet of wool. "You're making me look a sight, yanking me in like this. You needn't think you can whisper the oracle to me because I'm a woman who sells eggs and honey. I paid my drachma, same as anybody else —"

"Yes. Yes. But hear me."

"— and I'm going to have my message with all the trimmings: music and a vision and everything. I've got rights same as other people."

"But my prophecies, they're all —"

"Look, young woman." The mother stood, arms akimbo, and let her voice rise. "I didn't come for no nonsense. I don't put up with no nonsense. I've been saving egg money close on two months. I know what Amasara gives for a drachma and I mean to have it. You start this oracle all over." She turned and stalked angrily away.

"Listen, only listen —" Rhodis caught her by the shoulder.

The farmer's wife squealed, "You keep your hands to yourself. Some folks say it makes a woman crazy if a priestess sets a finger on her. You keep away from me or I'll complain to Amasara, I will." She gave Rhodis a nasty look, then bolted like a rabbit.

The girl faced the three-legged seat. She shivered a little as we came in. I

hadn't prevented my young assistant from returning with a whip in his hand. He gestured to her to sit down. She looked toward me, but I was busy picking bits of lint off my tunic. Birdbrain gestured again — with the whip. The girl went to her place slowly, but she went. Her shoulders sagged with discouragement.

My young priest hid his lash. I removed a brazier (no use wasting incense) and replaced it with jars of water and fresh herbs. I crushed a little sweet marjoram, and afterward I gestured. Flute music sounded faintly, then grew louder.

"Ready?" Birdbrain spoke to Rhodis out of the side of his mouth as he went toward the curtained wall. His eyes stopped where his whip was hidden. "Ready?" he muttered again. Rhodis and I nodded. Then with a slow, stately movement I drew the curtains aside.

The farmer's wife walked in, tossing her head a little. The priestess had risen; her eyes looked beyond the woman.

"I see a child, a man child, walking." Her tone was glad yet somehow solemn too. "I see a woman binding fennel and sweet herbs upon his ankles. He dances. He runs." She caught her breath. "Oh the swift runner! He races the boys in the meadow. Quick, child! Quick, or you will not beat them!" She moved her eyes as if they followed someone skimming past.

Then she looked down, noticing for the first time the woman at her feet. "But this — this is the woman of my vision." She raised her hands to her forehead. "The very woman," she murmured. "Do I wake? Do I sleep?"

"Your son will be cured of his affliction." I moved toward the farmer's wife. "Only bind sweet herbs and fennel upon his feet." I smiled like an old man looking at his favorite daughter. The flute music was loud as twenty birds.

The farmer's wife lumbered to her feet. "That's what I paid for," she announced. She sniffed, partly to enjoy the sweet marjoram, partly to express her opinion of Rhodis. She took her time walking out of the room while Birdbrain and I held back the heavy linens hanging between the columns.

"We shall rest a minute," I said to Rhodis after the curtains fell into place. "Then the barbarians. Then you're through for the day."

My assistant fixed his eyes on the girl. "And no monkey business about 'I can't. I won't. I'm scared.' You're good, but not good enough to get away with that."

She had not noticed my man moving toward the hidden whip, but it was in his hand.

"I won't — again. Not even — if you —" Rhodis gasped. She cried to me, "It's coming—closer. My terror."

Her hands caught at her throat. I have seen animals in traps. Her eyes had that look.

"Can you *act*! But when you feel this," Birdbrain raised his lash and she saw it was knotted, "the yell you let out won't be phony." I was afraid his language would completely upset a girl sensitive as Rhodis — perhaps even more than his whip.

As a matter of fact, the whip was all she noticed. She gaped silently, unable to move her lips. Then before anyone so much as touched her, she fainted.

That was something to handle carefully. When Rhodis came to herself, Birdbrain was not there; only I, patting her hand, holding something under her nostrils. I told her gently not to worry, fondled her hand, and said over and over that another girl could be the god's voice for our important cases. I thought she would straighten up and object. But no, she only looked grateful. I kept on saying it.

At last she did speak. "Yes. Yes. Take anyone — anyone else. I'm running away. Back to my village."

Now I rather like acting myself. I sat on the step below her carved chair and looked sad. My voice got confidential. "And I thought I was helping you when I brought you here, when we fed you. How often does anyone in your village eat a full meal? Or leave anything over for you? No hut for you, was there? Dirtiest rags in the place." I fingered her robe. "Remember?"

She nodded.

"You liked it here at first," I went on. "And did you wolf your food!" I paused a long while. "Forgotten what it's like to be hungry?"

"No." Rhodis gave a faint miserable sigh.

"You know when you're well off. We'll hold the barbarians till you're ready. I was only joking when I talked about using a different girl. You're the best we have. Then tomorrow —"

"No!" She looked frightened. "No! I'll go — now."

"I suppose it doesn't matter if they beat me because of a runaway priestess."

"But you're important. Nobody'd — They couldn't hurt *you*."

"Couldn't they!" I laughed — hard, hollow laughter.

"But — But — You're Amasara's right hand. You know how everything's done."

"Yes, and showed everything to you." I watched her eyes get wide with horror. I stroked her again. "But don't think about me. If you want to go, go. You'll find a way; if not now then some dark night. And I'm an old man. I can face what comes my way. Even — death."

She shuddered.

"I'm not complaining." I wish you could have heard me quaver. "I thought — oh, never mind —" I held her shaking little hand against my cheek. "I had a daughter once. I saw you and — well — Remember how happy I was when those thin cheeks of yours got so pretty, when you began to smile as you woke up instead of thinking, 'Another day. Another day?' No, don't remember that." I spoke quickly; timing meant a lot in this crisis. "I was nothing to you. I fooled myself. All you liked was a full plate." I laughed again in an ugly way. Her eyes grew moist. "Don't ever think of this place again — of me," I sniffed, "the old man who gave you real love."

I walked away from her, my head down. A big sob tore out of her throat. She ran to me, throwing her arms round my neck. How she cried, right on this shoulder! I knew I had won even before she breathed, "I'll stay. I'll stay."

I led her back to the seat with carved arms and settled her among the cushions.

"And all this while the god hasn't done a thing, not one thing. Come on," I slipped into waterfront talk again, "just one grade-A vision for those characters with a lingo like baa-baa-beh. Then you're through. Then there's wine, wine with honey, waiting. Why, you'll laugh yourself sick at the idea of being scared. *Who was scared? Scared of what?* you'll say. Come on, sweetheart. Give. First thing the old man ever asked. You're not letting him down. He knows that." I watched while she straightened herself. I adjusted the thongs of her sandal. "A few tears look good. Pretty, shiny eyes."

She only stared past me the way she had stared past the king, the farmer's wife. She hardly seemed to know what was happening around her.

My assistant slipped in again. He signaled for me to start, whispering, "All settled about the roof."

"What'd we get?" I whispered back. "Cedar? Bronze?"

"Tile. That split the difference. Now Amasara wants us to send the barbarians back where they came from — fast. They're lousing up the whole shrine." He gestured toward the priestess with his thumb. "She ready?"

She was ready. She was magnificent. Her face looked as if she were having a vision of all the horror that could be crowded into one mortal's life. That face by itself could start the barbarians running to their forests. You know they're even stupider than most of the people who come here.

Then I heard thunder come up with a low rumble and end crashing. Flames poured down like forked violet rivers. Between flashes I felt the darkness would smother me. I wanted to run out but I was so sick and dizzy I could only lean against a pillar.

Each time lightning blazed, I remembered my mother's stories about the gods and their revenges. I remembered people who turned to stone or became blind. I believed like a child. I heard the young soothsayer groan; he felt what I did.

By the flashes, we could see Rhodis groping — and even with the thunder, I sometimes caught what she said. "Shoes." I could see her lips make the word even when the crashes drowned her voice. Then she cursed war. She wept. She was crying, I think, over the dead bodies of her sisters, but even while she cried, she was saying, "I can't go barefoot." She tore something from the dead feet of the children in her vision.

"I've got to. I've got to," we heard her say. "The house is rubble. I haven't a pair." She sobbed and shook as she tried to force her feet into what they had worn. I thought she must have been a princess or a great lord's daughter, but in her vision all the children went about shod till the war came. It sounded strange, but I could make nothing else out of her babblings.

After she put the shoes on, she hunted through ruins, looking for food. I could tell by her gestures that she did not find it. She moaned, "I've had nothing since morning." All the while she spoke of this and that thing, for in the land of her vision they had many, many strange foods. She talked of chests, even rooms, piled full of meats and fruits that would not spoil. But after a long search she said wearily, "People will know real hunger now. I'll know it."

Then she began to shiver and cry again. I could not follow all she said; I caught the word *destruction*. The girl was wild with fear, and screamed about something that travelled faster than the sound it made. Frightened as I was, I knew nothing could do that. I looked at Birdbrain, who was shaking his head now.

Then what do you think she wailed? "I'm hurt — cut — badly. I didn't even know it — first." That sounded right. I've seen soldiers in battle, bleeding and not realizing they were wounded till afterward. I felt my flesh chill. At least I shivered until she sobbed, "I must have — have been cut by flying glass — when — the windows shattered."

Imagine: glass windows! We had one little glass vase here. You could look through the sides, almost like looking through air. One day a priestess broke it, and a smooth piece cut her as if it had been a knife. See how Rhodis's mind worked? That glass window made me realize I was dealing with a girl and her make-believe, not with any god. For minutes, though, I felt as if that war were something real, happening somewhere; as if Rhodis had been swept into it by a pure miracle.

Then suddenly darkness was gone. The last thunderclap rumbled and

quiet came. (I never did find out how Rhodis learned the thunder signal. I'm supposed to be the only one who gives it.) I thought clearly for the first time in half an hour — and I saw that Rhodis had put on such a performance she'd made a hard-boiled professional like me accept it. Remember what I told you about hysteria and how it creeps into an audience? Birdbrain and I had been spellbound, spellbound by a girl we'd seen practicing a hundred times. Busy as I was that afternoon, my mind raced off into a golden future. I planned a new oracle, for Rhodis and me —

There's no need to go into that. For then came the strangest part of all. Rhodis acted as if she were still seeing her vision. She talked in a hopeless tone of a Second World War (whatever that might be), of food doled out to a people who had had plenty, and of the good life — the good life for everyone which their wise men had almost brought into their reach. She said, "We were mad to destroy this. Mad to let it be destroyed. Mad. Mad. Mad."

The child had worked herself into such a state that she believed — actually believed — in everything she'd made up, from all the food to glass windows. I can't blame anyone but myself for her state of mind. It came from my attending to those curtains after the king went out, instead of making Rhodis roll up the rug and do a dozen little active things that would have kept her steady, so that she wouldn't be wailing now, "Then God has punished me. I have been one with a future people who broke their world into pieces. I cannot forget it."

"Look," I said in my kindest voice, for I had to get her in shape for the barbarians, "I can prove that you never saw any kind of future. Then you won't go mad, not over — nothing!"

She only stared.

"I know something about fools, having spent my life around an oracle."

My assistant broke in, "You know the saying: Fools, damn fools, and people who go to oracles."

I argued, "Even a god couldn't dream up the kind of fools you saw. If they had half the things you talked about, there'd be enough for everybody in the world." I did not mention the incredible, like windows; just simple things that could almost have been real. "Think again of shoes for everybody, not just the king. Why, fellows like Birdbrain here could get all your food dealt out and then everybody'd be happy. Even barbarians don't go to war unless they're hungry. Stop shuddering a minute. What you've been saying doesn't make any sense, does it?"

She kept crying, "It was a true vision, I tell you. I shall go mad."

I was stern at that. "A priestess would go mad much faster if she left us than if she stayed and worked here. Why did you think we let you talk to

the farmer's wife? So you could see for yourself how people feel. Remember she wouldn't let you touch her? Suppose you ran away. Nobody in the village would give you water; nobody'd give you bread."

"There are other villages."

My young soothsayer licked his lips as he remarked, "We have influence right to the Thracian border."

"Let me go. I'll live in the forest."

"One girl tried that," I remarked.

My young friend added, "They found her bones later."

"Gnawed clean," I finished.

I let that sink in. Finally I said, very gently, "Ready to see those hairy fellows in wolf skins?"

"What else can I do?" She went back to her place. This time I gave the light signal.

The barbarians filed in. Rhodis scared them into going home, not that she was half as good as she had been when only Birdbrain and I saw her, but she was good enough.

After that, though, she lost her fire. You'd like to see her? Why, you did. That girl in the courtyard, staring with a faraway look at nothing. And I once believed she had possibilities!

Now to get back to business: If you can stand working under conditions like ours, I'll be glad to take you on as my assistant.

REPORT ON THE SEXUAL BEHAVIOR OF THE EXTRA-SENSORY PERCEPTOR

— Oh, Dr. Rhine! Oh, Dr. Rhine!

Your antagonists are just the same as mine.

Statisticians say a sample

Must be huge before it's ample

And our runs are much too short to prove design.

— Oh, Dr. Kins! Oh, Dr. Kins!

Untrained men are awfully easy to convince.

Our ideas could never move them

If we took the time to prove them

Positively, Dr. Kinsey.

— Absolutely, Dr. Rhine!

HERMAN W. MUDGETT

Hollywood has done strange things indeed to science fiction; and the wildest old magazine tales of space adventurer Hawk Carse and the sinister Dr. Ku Sui seem tame and even scientifically rational beside some of the space exploits recorded on film. And all this has been achieved in only two or at most three dimensions; what new wonders are bound to dazzle us when the movies stumble upon 4-D? Mr. Beaumont, who has done time in a major studio himself, introduces the 4-D projector, the Quadriopticon, in a delightful blend of satire, slapstick, and sheer adventure.

The Quadriopticon

by CHARLES BEAUMONT

IT WAS A DARK musty place, bigger than it had to be and faintly reminiscent of a family crypt. The asbestos-and-cork walls were peeling like the bark of a dead tree, the proscenium drapes were holey rags, the ceiling was covered with a million plastered cracks. But Projection Room #7 had a nice carpet: rich, thick, crimson.

Like Sherman Boetticher's face. Of course he tried to fake it by putting on his informal smile, but this failed because the smile looked as if it had been drawn on with a burnt match by a small boy. To the assembled crowd stationed in regiments in the tan leather studio chairs, the truth was evident: Sherman Boetticher was coming loose at the hinges.

Finally he looked at his watch, giggled once and trembled forward. "All right," he said, "I guess we'll just have to proceed. I'm sure Rock was unavoidably detained; however, in deference to Mr. Mendel, who is, as we all know, a very busy man — Jimmy! Let's go."

The lights dimmed down to almost absolute blackness. Then a thin blue spot came on and picked around the room for a few seconds before lighting on the mole-faced producer. Boetticher opened his mouth and began: "Ladies and gentlemen, what you are about to witness will take its place as the most unusual, the most startling, the most precedent-smashing advancement in the history of the motion picture. Thanks to a revolutionary —"

"Hands up, everybody!" A tall well-built figure in a trench coat stepped suddenly into the spotlight and gave Sherman Boetticher a quick hard

push. The figure held something in his hand that glinted silver. "This is the vice squad! You're all under arrest for violating the Mann Act, the Woman Act, and what is that couple doing in the third row balcony?"

The lights came on. Rock Jason blinked a few times and replaced the shining silver hip-flask in his breast pocket. "Heartbroken that I'm late, citizens — trust no one was inconvenienced, hey, Mendel?" He grinned and swayed slightly to the left.

Marcus Mendel, the studio manager, smiled the quickest, smallest, most obligatory of smiles and swiveled his head back toward the screen.

Boetticher's little fists unball'd and he took the tall man's arm. "You're just in time, Rock. Now if you'll take a seat . . ."

Jason shook his arm loose and glared imperiously.

"Rock, please," Boetticher whined.

The man whose real name was Leroy Guinness O'Shea winked and brought his hand down on a bare and exceedingly freckled back. "Bless me, if it isn't the tail well calculated to keep you in suspense!"

Shiela Tyler smiled gaily. "Hello, doll."

"Darling!"

Jason stumbled across legs to his chair. He sat down next to the corpulent-hipped queen of the columnists, Dolly Dixon, whose sudden kewpie smile made her face look like a crumpled balloon. "Rock, you naughty boy — I swear, I mean, you'd be late for your own funeral! Aren't you knocked out?"

"In a sense," Jason said, removing the flask and shaking it disappointedly. Then he leapt up: "I *refuse* to sit next to this woman!"

Dolly Dixon's face reddened and then exploded in a germ-laden laugh. "Stop, oh stop!"

Boetticher's eyes were now his only mobile feature. "Why?" he asked dutifully.

"Because," Jason said, planting a kiss on the powder-caked cheek, "she gets grabby."

"Stop, Rock, you old rogue, you old liar!"

Jason smiled. He hiccupped. "Well, all right — but no kneesies."

"Ha ha. That's just so deliriously funny!"

He jerked his head around. Only one person in the world would dare to be so openly sarcastic to him: Robbie. Dear Robbie, his co-star, the face that launched a thousand fan magazines.

"Ah," Jason cooed, "America's *other* sweetheart. How are you, love?"

Robin Summers wasn't smiling at all. "Just dandy," she said. "Now does Mr. Box Office think he might shut up long enough for us to see the picture?"

She was indecently beautiful today. Golden brown skin lustrous against

the white no-sleeved blouse, wild jetblack hair set off by simple silver earrings . . . and that thin black ribbon around her throat. . . .

"Don't fret, darling," Jason said. "If you miss it now you can catch it at your nearest bagnio."

Dolly dissolved at that one. Her jellyfolds of fat quivered and exuded the powerful aroma of musk. The combination, the perfume and the flask of whisky, made Jason's head float uncomfortably.

Robin Summers threw herself back in her chair. Her round full lips were pulled down in inexpressible anger.

Jason hiccupped again. "On with the production!" he hollered. "I yield the floor."

The lights got dim again and the spot picked up Boetticher's faulty and helpless figure.

"As I was saying," he intoned, "this is an historic occasion. What you are about to watch is the newest innovation, and the greatest, since 3-D — since sound, even! Through a secret process, which we have spent ten years in developing —"

Jason fingered his mustache and snorted lowly. He leaned toward Dolly's ear. "Poor Sherm is a dear sweet thing," he whispered. "Lies so convincingly, don't you agree? I mean, is there *anyone* who doesn't know that this little fellow — what's his name, Gottfried, Gottschalk — invented it by accident and sold to highest bidder . . ."

"— and, from now on, all of Galactic's pictures will employ the use of this startling invention, the Quadriopticon. Now, I'm not going to bore you with a lot of technical language at this present instant. But basically, what we have here is a machine that literally puts *you* inside the picture! That's what I said. No glasses are required for this process, no discomfort, no eyestrain. The use of the revolutionary Prismascopic screen not only gives the illusion of third dimension, but makes this illusion stick! Ladies and gentlemen, the 3-D 'flatties' are a thing of the past. No more throwing things at the audience to suggest realism — folks, it's there, all the time! And why? you ask. Because the image is broken up for you by the Quadriopticon, which works exactly like the human eyes. The Prismascopic screen is actually many screens, each overlay representing the effect of each frame of depth on the naked eye." Boetticher tapped his glasses for effect. "Ever try looking through a screen door? What do you see? Wait now — two things, each completely different. If you concentrate on the screen, then you can't see anything else outside; if you 'adjust' your human telescopes, see, then the screen disappears — right? Well, this amazing machine permits us to do just that with our image, in exactly the same identical way."

Boetticher looked proudly disdainful over the blank pond of faces.

"But let's save some surprises. Believe me, please, take my word for it folks; it's revolutionary. It'll put Galactic Pictures right back into position as the foremost production unit in the world!" Boetticher was warming up; the embarrassment flushed out of him: it was his baby. He began to sound like a bad canny barker, the words most frequently used being *revolutionary* and *tremendous*.

"And so," he said, "it was only natural that the world's first picture in 4-D—"

Ears perked up: these were the magic words. 4-D!

"—should star the inimitable team, Rock 'n Robbie, those grand troupers and America's Sweethearts. Ladies and gentlemen, we give you the most thrilling story ever written, a tremendous follow-through on the current science fiction trend—" Herman Mancini, the writer, sank down in his seat "— *The Conquest of Jupiter!* Starring Rock Jason and Robin Summers! Filmed in fabulous color with the fabulous 4-Dimensional Quadriopticon camera!"

The spot flicked out and the room was dark. Rock Jason smiled: he'd seen the rushes. They were pretty fair. It involved some hocus-pocus with a prised screen—which he could hear being lowered in the blackness.—and some junk sprayed out through a bellows, "to bring not only sight and sound but also *smell* to motion pictures." It was all right. It would kick up some excitement and that would net him more dollars—but it would die out, just as everything had since the big 3-D rush. Then Galactic would be back riding on his shoulders. Which was all right, too.

He could hear Robbie breathing in back of him. The little moron—of them all, he thought, she detests me the most. Well, such is Fame's Cross. Great men have ever had their enemies. Little jerk. Didn't she know he could kill it for her, like *that!* Just refuse to play in a picture with her. Then where would the independent Miss Summers be? The independent, beautiful, lovely, desirable Miss Sum . . .

"I'm so excited," Dolly was whispering, "I could just flip. Couldn't you just flip, Rock?"

"Like a trained dog, sweet."

"Well, they're certainly keeping us on edge. Leave it to Sherm. Sherm's a live wire. Sherm's going places."

"Sherm," Jason said truthfully, "stinks."

The lights came on again. Billy Zelmo, the comic, got up and did a Bronx cheer. There were rustlings.

"A little difficulty getting the sync right," Boetticher called from the booth. He was dying.

Jason swam across the legs and tumbled out into the aisle, stopping only to stick out his tongue at Mendel.

"Fear not!" he hooted. "Fortunately among my variegated talents, I am a highly skilled projectionist." Still carrying along the flask, he careened up the aisle.

Robbie was furious. He could tell. Why should she get so furious? Her eyes were flashing embarrassedly, those black black eyes.

"Here now boys, let me at it!"

"It's all right, Rock," Boetticher rattled, "it's all right. We got it fixed okay now. Why don't you just —"

"Nonsense. Permit a trained man to make it official."

He didn't exactly know why he was doing it. He could see the agony outside on the faces of the others in the film: Guy Randolph, the old regular, the scared-to-death ex-Shakespearean who once went three years without a picture job; Burton Mitchell, on his last legs, hungry for the break this seemed to be; the rest, the frightened people who all knew that this roll of celluloid could make or break them, depending upon its outcome. And now Rock Jason was doing his damndest to louse it up for them.

"Rock, this is important. We've got to snag Mendel. *Please* sit down."

The lights had been killed. The Quadriopticon, a weird box that didn't even look like a projector, had begun to hum and warm.

"Don't tell me what to do, you — sycophant! I said I'd fix it and that's what by God I intend to do!"

Jason pushed Boetticher's limpid form away and advanced on the machine.

There was a small door on the back. He opened this.

"Don't touch!" someone said, trying to grab his hands. "You shouldn't touch!" It was little Mr. Gottschalk.

"Avaunt!" he yelled at the bald-headed old man, and gave him a push, too.

Mr. Gottschalk stumbled out of his way.

Behind the tiny door was a pair of electrodes. The ball-pointed shafts of metal crackled and danced white hot light. Beyond the field was an indented knob. Jason started to reach.

"Nein, nein! Wait. I will turn it off —"

His right hand, which held the metal flask, was draped across the bare metal control cabinet; with his left hand, Jason reached far in and felt the sparks tickle and fry his flesh. The whisky container touched metal at the exact moment he grabbed the flying knob.

Rock Jason felt a giant hand pick him up and toss him away, far away, where it was all dark and quiet. . . .

"Commander Carlyle, sir, I—" The man stuttered helplessly. "Sir, how do you keep it up? Sizzling jets, you haven't slept for five nights."

One by one Rock Jason opened his eyes. He shook his head vigorously and said, "Ohhh." He tried to, but somehow could not quite, put things together: he was overcome with the greatest drowsiness he had known since that memorable do in Malibu. Sleep crudded his eyes and brain.

"You're perfectly right, Ronnie. Can't account for it. So tired . . ."

"Beg pardon, sir?"

Jason looked at the young man. Let's see — of course: a binge. Probably with Doris Dulane, the bitch. She'd tanked him up, or let him get tanked up, and now they were pulling one of their idiotic gags. Like Eddie Fritz's famous upside-down room.

"Ronnie, be a dear child and take the ridiculous Mason jar off your head. And steer me to a bed. Quickly."

Ronald Curtis, a fairly typical Sunset Boulevardier and an incurable whiner, stood at strict attention. Pretty cocky, all considered. If it hadn't been for Jason's big heart, the kid would still be perched on a stool at Schwab's dreaming of the movies.

Jason pinched the flesh of his arm. Sleep. Great Oliver, what had he been drinking! "Darling," he said with immense control, "I'm in no mood for jokes. Tomorrow perhaps. A bed is what I'm in the mood for now. A soft bed. Do you understand?"

The young man looked hopelessly bewildered. "But, Commander Carlyle, sir — that is —"

Very well. Tend to the ignoramus later. "Never mind. I'm sure I will be convulsed with the hilarity of this situation by next morning. I am not now amused. So go away, and leave me alone."

Jason's head nodded toward the desk. There was a ringing reverberating clang. He reached up and felt the glass helmet. "And *what*," he moaned, "this is I'd like to know. Goddam it, help me off with it — this minute!" He began to search for clamps, sensing a fuzzy blackness clouding his mind.

"Sir, be careful! The ribs haven't been repaired yet."

"Ronnie, I love you like a son, genuinely I do. But if you don't get this thing off me and stop this nonsense immediately, I'm afraid I'll have to discuss your future with Mendel. I'm a sick man. What the devil are you talking about — ribs?"

"The Mercutians, sir. Their armada surprised us. We were hit."

"Stop that!" We were hit . . . of course. That horrible science fiction thing. These were lines from the movie. They'd rigged up the room to look like the first scene set. INT. ROCKET SHIP — COMMANDER'S CABIN — MED. SHOT. And this was the bit where Jason as Commander

Derek Carlyle was supposed to be working day and night because only he knew how to repair the damage to the complex machinery.

"Benson and Carstairs are dead, sir. Their air ran out."

Charming. Now what was next line? Oh yes. *Very well, Lieutenant. Fix me some black coffee. I'm going out there and finish the job.*

"Yes, sir."

"Oh, shut up."

"Sir?"

"I said — darling, whose captivating idea was this? Doris'?"

The young man kept looking confused, standing there quietly looking confused. Well — damn good acting. Give him that. Maybe too good.

Strange, Jason thought, that he couldn't remember *anything* about last night. He knew he was supposed to have appeared for Boetticher's party with the Quadriopticon. But — oh yes — he'd stopped by the Inferno first, for a very short one. Then . . . *then?*

"We got the last one, sir."

"*Last* what?"

"Mercutian. Johnson beamed his forward jets. That wipes them all out. Sir — if we get the damage repaired in time, we're Venus bound!"

"Ronnie, *please* — my head!"

"I'll get the coffee, sir."

The young man saluted smartly, did an about face and marched out of the room.

Must be Doris. Who else would have the money to build such a duplication of the set? The cabin was perfect. To the last detail. They'd even put him in that monstrous spacesuit dear Carpenter had dreamed up, the swine. How un-chic can you get? Next thing they'd be putting him in Indian blankets. Spacesuits. Whither thou, Thespis?

Ohhh. One's head. Well, figure it out later. Get some sleep is the thing now.

He tore viciously at the clamps that secured the helmet. They slipped loose. He lifted off the glass bubble.

He found he could not breathe; the blackness fuzzed up entirely and he fainted promptly.

Very dark . . . very quiet . . .

"Commander Carlyle, sir, I—" The man stuttered helplessly. "Sir, how do you keep it up? Sizzling jets, you haven't slept for five nights."

Jason pulled himself into consciousness. *Now* what was it? The whole idiotic bit again? He tapped upward with tentative fingers. The Mason jar, right back on his head. And he'd taken the thing off. Hadn't he?

"You shall pay for this, Ronnie Curtis. In full."

"Benson and Carstairs are —"

Well, maybe it's part of the gag. Let him pass out and then wake him up and start it again, ad nauseum.

"I know, I know — dead. Wonderful. Fine. At least Benson and Carstairs have got some peace and quiet now. Stop looking so foolish! And *do* for heaven's sake stop saying 'sizzling jets!' What a line!"

"Yes, sir. About the damage, Commander —"

"Fix it yourself. What am I talking about? Say, weren't you just in here a minute ago?"

"No, sir."

"And stop saying 'sir!'" Jason rapped at the helmet perched on his shoulders. "I am dying," he said. "Here, help me up. Get me a Bromo. I'm going to have a word with Doris."

The young man assisted Jason to his feet. They walked out of the cabin.

"For Pete —" Jason stopped and stared. "Just how far does a gag go?"

It was the rocket ship, perfectly done. Except the bars under his hands didn't feel like silver-painted plaster. They felt very real.

The young man thrust some odd looking things into his hands. "Good luck, sir."

Suddenly, he was being helped up a ladder. Below, a number of extras he'd never seen stared in unbelieving admiration. "There goes a *man*," someone whispered. "You couldn't drag *me* out there," commented another.

"Now wait a minute!" Jason cried. Above, the alloy roof was gashed and instruments hung loose. The night looked very black.

A powerful aroma suddenly seemed to permeate the helmet, cutting up through his nostrils. The smell of dryness and deserts, cooked up by Pa Franklin to simulate the odors of far space. If there *were* odors in far space.

He began to feel peculiar. What was all this, after all? Was he actually on the set again, for a remake? He looked for the crew, James the director, Bolana the cameraman — but there was only the ship and these crazy people and the stars.

Then a horrible thought occurred to him: So this is the DT's! Dr. Morris had warned him. Plenty of times.

Delirium tremens. Oh no. No. But what else?

Jason found himself on the outer hull of the rocket. Exactly as in the first scene of *The Conquest of Jupiter*. In fact, everything followed the scene. Now he was supposed to start fixing the airlock or some sort of gimmick and a Mercurian — beg pardon, *Mercutian*, and where did these "science" fiction writers think the planet Mercutio was located? — a Mercurian devil-man was supposed to creep up on him and —

"Look out, sir!"

Jason glanced up, dazedly from the twisted machinery and faced a gigantic orange creature with scales and eyes of an alarming protuberance.

"Pinkie, for God's sake don't *do* that!"

The creature came closer, slowly, leering with the pride of the special effects department, three mouths where the eyes should have been, but weren't. It said something that sounded like: "Umbawa unbawa, figgg-ouf!"

"What was that, Pinkie? I can't hear a word with this imbecile thing on. Repeat?"

"*Umbawa unbawa, figgg-ouf!*"

"Stop growling. And take off that moldy left-over from *John Carter on Mars* and tell me when the hell this bit is going to end."

The creature was almost upon him, liquid fire oozing from the giant pores between scales. Its body odor suggested that of the Inside Man at the Putrefaction Works.

"Shoot, sir! Oh, sir!"

"He's a cool one, Commander Carlyle. Knows what he's about."

"Pinkie. That is, I wish — Pinkie?"

"UMBABA UNBABA, FIGGG-OUF MAGOFU!"

"Good God!"

Jason tried to turn and run but his magnetic shoes held him fast to the hull. He whipped around and permitted his jaw to drop as the creature's arms began to encircle him.

"Please! I've told you a dozen times, I'm not that way. Especially here in front of — Pinkie? I'll have you fired. I will."

Automatically Jason wrenched loose one hand from the steaming tentacles and squeezed the trigger of the gun he'd forgotten about. A beam of light sprang out into the monster's face. "Umbawa unb-a-wa figg —" The monster fell and proceeded to float away in the darkness of space, its stench floating after it, if too slowly for comfort.

"Magnificent! Carlyle knew his gun wouldn't have been any use except at close range. What *guts*."

Jason's fingers seemed to move of their own accord about the broken machinery. He watched with fascination. Then his legs took over and brought him back down the ladder.

"She'll be all right now, men," his voice said.

"Hurrah! Hurrah!"

"Now," said Jason's voice, "Denton, you and Marchelli do the patch-work. I'm going to catch a few winks. Wake me at 0700 promptly."

His legs propelled him along the catwalk and took him back into the cabin.

He lay down on the bunk. "DT's," he said, aloud. "They're murderous."

Sleep came to the courageous commander of the spaceship *Starfire*; sleep well earned by a man who had toiled five days and five nights to bring his craft safely through the greatest space battle of all time.

Jason started to remember something just before unconsciousness set in. "Murderous," he mumbled and closed his eyes.

"Aldridge, you traitorous cur. Court-martialing is too good for you!"

"You mean . . . ?"

"Exactly."

Jason scratched his head. How long, he wondered, does this kind of thing go on? After all, DT's are supposed to wear off, aren't they? Or are they —?

"What do you propose to do about it, earthling?" the uniformed navigator spat. It was the ex-Shakespearean, Guy Randolph. A small part, but plenty dramatic. Well, play along. Scene two, isn't it? You've discovered that the navigator, Aldridge, is really a Venusian in disguise and is the one who alerted the Mercutians and caused — oh Mancini, from the Pulitzer Prize to *this*? — caused the Mercutians to attack and ambush. Now he, Aldridge, had misrouted the *Starfire* and they were headed for Jupiter — the Death Planet. Great. Great little plot. Academy Award.

"What do you propose to do about it, earthling?"

Fight scene. Big fight. Well, delirium tremens only means that you're dreaming. Jacket off. Sleeves up. Sneer. "Get ready, Aldridge — unless you're too yellow."

"You would overrun our world and bring the pestilence of war that ruined your own?" Randolph declaimed in a bad imitation of Maurice Evans. "Never!"

"Take," Jason said, hauling off, "*that*, Venusian filth!"

He carefully missed Randolph's jaw. The man grinned savagely and lunged, his hands snaking up around Jason's neck.

Jason pulled loose the fingers and caught his breath. "What's the big idea, darling?" He started to walk away, massaging the bruised flesh. Very real, he thought, for a dream.

The navigator flung himself upon Jason's back and they fell to the floor. Randolph pounded away, changing form the while: presently, he was a sticky green ameba-like blob.

"Never again," Jason resolved, wishing he had one drink nonetheless. He tore himself free and ran out the door and slammed the door shut. He hurt all over. "Enough," he panted, "is enough!" He went to the airlock and began to pull it open.

Blackness. Inside his head.

Very dark . . . Very quiet . . .

"Aldridge, you traitorous cur! Court mar —"

Like the rushes of a film turned back for editing. Right back to the same damn line. And Randolph wheeling around in his chair.

"You mean?"

Jason remembered how the first scene had gone back. What had done it? Of course. Changing the script. Everything went fine until he did something that Commander Derek Carlyle wouldn't do, something that was impossible to the structure of the story. Then, *zip!* All over again. The dim realization came to him that if he was ever to get out of this he would have to follow the script to the end. But how the hell could that be? No. No no. Not with what was coming up!

"Exactly."

Scene 3: Having beaten Aldridge to death, Commander Carlyle discovers stowaway on board. Beautiful chick. Sweet-smelling, too. Robin Summers. Usual mad-then-glad bit. Robbie is in love with him. Kiss. Headed for peril. Jupiter unknown planet. Maybe hostile. Phew!

"What do you propose to do about it, earthling?"

Bless little Herman. What was this lousy picture about anyway? Earth is being fried by strange ray from space. Authorities send ship to Venus to investigate. Ship has spy. Fight with Mercutians. Land on Jupiter. Turns out Jupiter the real menace. Jovians have Death Ray. Knock it out. Return home. Earth saved. Hotcha.

"You would overrun —"

Well, anyway they cut out those opening scenes. Space battles cost money, be praised. That would have been jolly.

Scene 4: The landing on Jupiter. Jovians appear and my oh my what a fight. Two days to film it. Murder.

Scene 5: They take Robbie hostage.

Scene 6: Commander Carlyle slips inside their temple and is captured.

Scene 7: The *Rakana!*

"Take *that*, Venusian filth!"

Jason fought hard. After all, Randolph was getting along. Sixty if he was a day.

He stomped the greenish blob to a jelly — for the matinee kiddies — and kicked it triumphantly into a corner.

His nostrils filled with the odor of charred flesh. Now, why charred flesh? Oh well. It made him gag. Smells. All the time these smells!

"Commander, we're off our course!"

"Ronnie, you sweet thing. How observant. I mean, how very observant.

That is: Very well, Lieutenant — I know all about it. Aldridge was a spy. We're going to have to try for a forced landing on Jupiter."

"*Jupiter!* Screaming asteroids, sir, that planet looks dangerous!"

"Danger is our business, Lieutenant."

"Yes sir. Jupiter it is."

That's it. Just reroute and land on Jupiter. Mancini, you brain, even the schoolboys know better than that. Forget it.

The young man stuck his head in the doorway.

"Stowaway on board, sir."

"All right, I'll have a look."

Wearily, Jason rubbed his head and went with the Lieutenant.

"Robbie, dear!" he said, when they brought the prisoner forward.

"How nice to see *someone* human. I'm having a dream, you know." Jason giggled. "You're looking splendid. Smelling splendid, too."

"I told you I'd be with you always, Derek," Robbie said, eyes glistening. "And I meant it."

"Why did you do this foolish thing?"

"Because I love you."

Jason grinned. Little liar. Oh, what a lie. "Say that again, darling."

"I love you, Derek."

"I should be angry, furious — but I'm not. We're in trouble, I suppose you know that."

"I know."

"And I suppose they told you we may not get out of this alive."

"It doesn't matter. Not as long as I'm with you."

Jason felt an impulse. Would Commander Derek Carlyle or would Commander Derek Carlyle not sweep the girl into his arms? It wasn't in the script. But — it was beginning to appear — it was all right if you didn't change it altogether. Revisions didn't hurt. Scripts are always being revised.

He swept her in his arms and kissed her and waited for the old fuzzy blackness to come. It didn't.

"Sweetheart!"

She *was* looking splendid. Carpenter did much better by her costume, such as it was. Some absolutely essential impedimenta, three or four sequined disks of varying shapes and all about the size of fig leaves. The diaphanous gown served only to heighten the effect of the deep cherry nut tan skin and the slender curves. And the scent . . . how could even Galactic's labs come up with a perfume that was so purely the odor of clean fresh woman? The look in her eyes, her black dancing eyes, was of an alarming sincerity.

He was going to suggest that they go elsewhere to chat, say to his cabin, where he could show her his navigational charts, but — Mancini had taken care of that. Commander Carlyle. Good egg. A nonagenarian in a harem. Duty first!

But as he looked at her, Jason felt strangely sad. It was the way she had pronounced the word *love*. Not brittle and lifeless, but — well, as if she really meant it. This part of the dream was not so bad, he decided. Maybe even worth the whole thing.

Nonsense, Jason!

Nonsense, your Aunt Hermione. Why kid yourself? You love the girl, don't you? Admit it in a dream, at least. After you wake up, you can hide in that gin-soaked shell if you want to and keep her from ever knowing . . .

"Jupiter ahead, sir!"

"Tell Michaels to prepare the brakes." Jason put a protective arm around Robbie. Her shoulder trembled. He could not bear to look into her eyes. "We'll make it, men, if we keep our heads!"

"I don't care. You stay here if you want to, Jeff. I'm going in."

"But it's sheer suicide! You don't stand a chance in a million of getting out with your skin —"

"It's a chance I'll have to take."

"Derek, listen to me. There's a thousand of those ugly devils and every one spoiling for a fight. They'd pick you up and — well, you know what happened to Fontaine."

"Yes. I — know."

"Well then, make *sense*, Derek! We can still clear out while there's time."

"Sorry, Jeff. No dice. I've made up my mind."

"You crazy fool. I wonder if that girl knows how much you love her . . ."

"It isn't just for Cynthia, Jeff. Don't you understand — it's our only chance to get at that Death Ray."

"Then I'm going to go with you."

"No. One might make it, not two. You go back to the ship, Jeff — that's an order."

"Yes, sir."

"Shake?"

"I — good luck, Derek. Good luck. We'll be waiting."

Jason watched the figure of Jeff Manning, the engineer, walk off toward the *Starfire*. Burton Mitchell, of course, looking as if he'd never spent a day at the phone praying for a call from Central Casting. Maybe he wasn't such a bad sort. They were all behaving well.

Stop it, you ass. This is a fit of some kind you're having. Burton Mitchell is a pitiful and extremely annoying has-been and if he hadn't pestered you to death — still — What's the story, are you letting these Perils-of-Pauline heroics warp your better judgment?

Twice in the picture Mitchell — Manning — had saved his life. Minor episodes. But he was touched. Couldn't help it. Everybody seemed so damned sincere about their corn. This flea-bitten space opera, running the gamut of emotions, the most basic basic emotions, simplified down to absurdity. But maybe it was the first time Rock Jason had ever been exposed, or permitted himself to be exposed, to real emotions of any kind. In Hollywood, he guessed, you've *got* to rely on dreams for lasting values. Dreams were the only things with value.

Look at him now. The climax of the picture. The big scene. Hero stuff. And yet he was feeling less like Rock Jason every moment and more like Commander Derek Carlyle, Herman Mancini's brainchild. Or was he merely feeling like Leroy Guinness O'Shea in days long ago, when the stage was a magic world and such things as love and honesty existed . . .

Jason felt the anger surge and he didn't try to check it. Trick-suits or not, pimple-faced extras or no pimple-faced extras, he hated the Jovians for what they had done. They had Robbie, the bastards. Well, they wouldn't have her long, by the holies!

He vaulted with great bounding leaps over the rough terrain and crouched at the marble wall of the temple. A guard slithered toward him, hissing. He let him have it. The guard fell. He wrapped the scarlet cloak about his shoulders and faked his entrance into the hall.

The animal smell almost asphyxiated Jason. Direct from the reptile house — he remembered. Together, for effect, with essence du stable.

The Emperor of Jupiter sat upon his throne, clucking gleefully.

"I thought our little ruse would work, Commander. Ah, don't attempt to shoot me. I am covered by a force field. And fifty *Kranek* pistols are aimed at your heart." It was Toby Bowles. Old Toby, who'd made a fortune playing villains because of his impossible face. Even with the weird makeup there could be no mistaking the kindly character actor. Or could there?

"You scum!" Commander Carlyle raged.

"Scum, eh? We'll see how the heroic commander's song changes after he sees — this!"

The emperor motioned with his hand and two slaves pulled aside a thick purple curtain.

"Cynthia! Robbie!"

"Derek!"

"Ah, a most touching reunion." The emperor laughed gutturally.

Robbie was spread-eagled and chained to the wall. The diaphanous gown was gone: she was as naked as the production code would allow. Bright thin red stripes crisscrossed her shoulders and other inoffensive regions.

Commander Carlyle spluttered out an oath and raced forward. The force field knocked him to his feet.

"Cynthia, what have they done to you?"

"Nothing," the emperor laughed; then he sobered, "... yet."

"I'll kill you, you Jovian filth!" Commander Carlyle hurled. "Then I'll have you fired, do you hear me? Blackballed by every studio from here to —"

"Strange talk, earthling. Bold talk. But we have more to show you. Come."

Two burly slaves, both looking alike, both resembling great lizards, pinioned Jason's arms and pushed him along roughly. They went through many halls and finally entered an immense rotunda.

An oversized machine something like a searchlight hummed and droned madly in the center of the room.

"The Death Ray!" Commander Carlyle exclaimed. The next lines of dialogue were lost in his fury.

"I see you recognize our little weapon. I thought perhaps you might be interested. Its effects are slow. But they are lasting. The warmth your earth feels now will be increased in a very short time to a heat so unbearable no life can exist."

"Then you move in. Right?"

"As you say, right. We're becoming rather overpopulous here."

"You cold-hearted — Toby, listen to me. Turn that thing off. And then turn Robbie loose. Immediately. Is that clear?"

"Prepare the prisoner for the *Rakana*!"

"Oh, let's not go through that miserable thing." Jason felt unwell. He had turned green just watching the stuntman. The late stuntman it was now.

"We will test your courage, brave soldier." Right straight out of *Gunga Din*.

"Let's talk it over, shall we?"

The blackness began to fuzz up. Stop it. You're too close to the end now. Keep this up and you'll land smack back at the beginning of reel nine!

"Do your worst to me. But release the girl."

"Ah!" the emperor said. "In accordance with the rules, I make you a promise. It is a fair one. In the event that you are victorious in the arena, both you and the girl will be free to leave unharmed."

There were soft, hissing, laughing sounds.

Commander Carlyle grinned wildly. "You've made yourself a deal, snakeface."

"Take him away."

Jason left happily. The *snakeface* had been his own.

Then he thought of what was to come and he stopped being happy.

The darkness of the cell was oppressive. It pushed in. The smell department had gone crazy here. A whiff from a local dairy, frou frou of abattoir, the gentle aromas of cattle barns, stables, cod-liver oil — every repulsive smell in the world. Jason alternately trembled and squared his jaw. It took thought.

On the one hand, this was a fit of the DT's and so, one way or another, he would wake up by and by and everything would be jimdandy. Plus the fact that according to the script Carlyle is victorious. But there was the other hand. Which was that the great stuntman, Ralph Laurie, who had in his career flown through fiery hoops, leaped into ravines and braved death in every conceivable manner, had been killed in this scene. The gorilla had killed Laurie. Stupid to use a gorilla anyway. Who ever heard of gorillas on Jupiter? Who ever heard of *anything* on Jupiter!

Jason thought about the big ape Bobo, painted a sickening bedroom pink, and he began to tremble more often than he squared his jaw.

He had about decided to give the whole thing up when the wooden gate was pulled open and light cascaded in. Two Jovian lizard men also cascaded in. They dragged Jason into the center of the vast circular arena. The crowd cheered madly.

The Jovians slithered away.

Then Jason remembered. Whirling, he saw Robbie. Tied to a stake in the exact center of the sandy circle. She was breathtakingly beautiful now. He went over to her.

She looked very frightened. The ropes had been carefully placed — Lila, from props, had spent almost an hour getting the rough thick loops just right. One above the breasts. One below them. One around the tummy. One — below.

"Robbie, darling!"

"Derek. Whatever happens, I love you, I love you, I —"

Jason put a hand over her lips. "You mustn't say it, he whispered. "Not after the way I've treated you. But Robbie, if we get out of this — I'll make it up. I swear I'll—"

"Derek, look out!"

The crowd's scream whipped him around. Jason swallowed.

It was Bobo. The gorilla. With that look in his eye.

"Nice Bobo. You remember me, Rocky? *Jungle Goddess* — remember?"

The ape walked on all fours twice around Jason. The crowd hushed.

Bobo stopped and scratched. Jason sighed. His heart was thumping. He noticed the flimsy spear the guard had put in his hand just before abandoning him to this dirty creature.

"Bobo, get back. Get back now. Don't do anything foolish."

Someone threw a heavy rock. It hit the ape's behind. "Aarrgh!" The ape roared disapproval and began to lope straight for Jason.

They sprinted around the arena a few times, the ape hot on his opponent's heels. Jason started to climb the wall. The black fuzziness. He dropped down. The giant creature was thundering toward him.

He closed his eyes. Nothing happened.

He opened his eyes.

Bobo was beating his villainous old chest and hooting at Robbie.

Jason ran over and delivered a well-aimed kick to the gorilla's hind-quarters, which were already tender from the rock. Bobo turned, scratched and leapt, saying "Aarrgh! Aarrgh!" They fell thuddingly on the sand. The gorilla's arms were crushing his chest.

"For heaven's sake," Jason managed to gurgle, "you're squashing me, you idiot!" They rolled over. And over. The crowd roared. The gorilla roared. Jason roared.

Then Bobo screamed an unearthly unjovian scream in the suddenly quiet arena.

Jason watched the ape clutching and flailing at the spear shaft, which was buried in soft chest flesh. He heard the thunder of over a ton of life hitting the sand. Then, when Bobo twitched no longer, he walked over, bowed in the direction of the emperor's box and pulled out the spear. As he did so, he wondered briefly what had happened.

The throng went crazy. Guards came galloping into the circle, hissing threats, and the emperor's voice could be heard screeching, "KILL the earthling! Kill him!"

"So," Commander Carlyle cried, "*this* is how the ruler of all Jupiter rewards bravery and keeps his promises!"

"Kill him!"

A *Kranek* gun crackled and Commander Carlyle grabbed at his shoulder. He dropped on one knee, tried to shake the pain from his mind.

Then he saw why the crowd had gone so crazy. The crew of the *Starfire*, stationed at crucial posts, were letting loose the fury of zam guns; the Jovians were falling like ants under a spyglass; the stink and sizzle of death on Jupiter filled the heavy air.

Of course! At this point in the scene they come to rescue him!

Commander Carlyle rose to his feet and raced along to the Royal Box. He reached up and pulled the fatty emperor down into the sand.

Toby fumbled with a pistol.

"Oh no you don't!" Commander Carlyle plunged the already bloodied spear into Toby's quivering throat. Then he ran back to the stake and cut loose Robbie's bonds. She collapsed into his arms; he winced at the pain in his shoulder and lifted her to the waiting, loyal Jeff.

"Thanks, boy."

"Okay, skipper!"

He grabbed a *Kranek* and blasted his way through the disorganized Jovians to the rotunda.

The lizard guard whirled, hissed disdainfully and brought his blaster into play. Commander Carlyle dodged the lethal ray and leapt upon the enraged Jovian.

This part, he recalled vaguely, was played by a particularly scrawny extra, so he directed his blows toward the Adam's apple, together with a few good ones to the belly. The Jovian dropped, hissing and moaning.

Commander Derek Carlyle took careful aim with his *Kranek* pistol. Then he fired. The ray hit the machine dead center. He fired again and again. Soon the Death Ray apparatus was a melted pile of steaming junk.

He smiled inscrutably and turned in time to blast the guards out of the doorway. Then he clutched a conveniently placed velvet cord and swung the length of the hall over the heads of the lizard horde, high over them, in a long graceful arc — then, in the sunlight, he ran, blasting his way to freedom.

There were Jovians waiting at the ship. Loyal, good and true Jeff lay dying on the volcanic soil and a slimy snake on legs was slithering away with Robbie in his stunted arms.

"Wait a second, friend."

The Jovian turned. The blast caught him directly in the face. He screamed.

Commander Carlyle helped Cynthia into the ship. Then he climbed back down.

"Jeff," he said. "Come on, let's — Jeff!"

"Sorry, Derek. This is one hand I'll have to sit out on. You'll — have to — go on without me. This is curtains."

"Jeff!"

More Jovians came barreling for the ship. *Kranek* rays cut through the air. One caught Jason's shoulder. Wait a minute — didn't the script girl catch that? For Pete's sake, that shoulder was supposed to be already hit. Never mind that now. Just get in the ship. Hurry!

The lizard men were battering at the door, slicing the alloy with their pistols.

"Let 'er rip!"

The jets thundered to life.

Commander Carlyle chuckled. "That ought to warm 'em up."

He could smile now.

The *Starfire* rose slowly like a gigantic phoenix; then it flashed off, a silver wink in the black-velvet sky.

Commander Carlyle stood at the starboard port. His eyes were sad. His arm was around the girl. She snuggled closer.

"Goodbye," he said, "Jeff, Harry, Don — all of you down there who didn't make it. You died, but your lives were not given in vain. Earth will never forget your sacrifice!"

"And earth will never forget," said the young lieutenant, "a man named Carlyle. God bless you sir. We all love you."

"Yes," Cynthia said, snuggling still closer as the stars whisked by, "we all love you, Commander Derek Carlyle!"

"Robbie," Jason said, holding her, pressing her nearer. "Robbie. Robbie, darling."

This time the blackness came and Jason didn't fight it. He only tried to hold onto that golden tan arm a little longer. . . .

Whistling. Applause. Cheers. Jason blinked, half expecting to find himself back in the *Rakana* field.

He tensed his body.

He opened his eyes, expecting to see Bobo the gorilla.

Instead he saw Sherman Boetticher.

He closed his eyes again. It was almost as bad.

"Rock — you all right? Speak to us. Say something."

"Breeng on de dancing gurls," Jason said. The dream was over. He remembered it all now. Or most of it, anyway.

"That's our Rock. Say, you had us worried, boy!"

"What'd I do, faint?"

"I wouldn't know — you just sort of stood here, watching the picture."

He looked puzzled —

"Is that so unusual?"

"Well, what I mean is, you pulled your hand out before Hymie could switch off the Quad and just — well, you didn't say boo. Just watched the picture."

"Is — is it over now?"

"Is it over? Listen to the man! It's a goddam sensation. It was the

smells that did it. Oh, *what* a brainstorm those smells were!" Boetticher was smiling broadly. "Excuse me now. Got to go meet our public."

He went outside, burbling happily. The voices were loud.

"How is your hand, Mr. Jason?" Little Mr. Gottschalk looked anxious.

"Beautiful, an artist's," Jason said, thinking of other things.

"I was afraid did you hurt it. Bad type business. Nobody, not even me, knows all about this machine. But so? Maybe all great inventions get borned like me, isn't it?" The little man looked quite sad. "I tell you tzegetret: what I am working on is not for movie camera. No! At first, I sink I got tzegetret to forse dimansion! Is beautiful! But — it wouldn't work. T'ousand times I tried: nossing, wouldn't work." He sighed. "So, I turn it into movie camera. All right?"

Jason nodded slowly, wondering about several things all at once.

The door opened. Dolly Dixon stood puffing. "*Daaarling!*" she ululated, "but it was the most! I mean, the end! I mean, what'll you just do with all your money?"

"Excuse me." Jason brushed past the confused sphere of columnists and looked around the room and then walked quickly out the doorway, tearing loose from the adoring crowd.

She was walking fast.

"Robbie. Wait."

Robin Summers turned around. "For what?" she said. "It's your show, isn't it?" Her black eyes didn't seem so angry. Why didn't they seem so angry? Jason thought for a moment they looked almost as they did on Jupiter.

"Robbie, I want to say some things to you. Will you listen?"

"If I have to." Her skin was even more shining gold in the lights.

"I want — Robbie, I want you to forgive me. I don't know why I'm saying this any more than you do, but I'm on the level. If it's a mood, it might pass; then I'd be the same egotistical, selfish, jealous, lonely person I've been for so many years. And you'd never know . . . I don't want to be that person again." Jason pulled her into a doorway. "I've treated you like hell. Because I've been afraid not to. Afraid of being laughed at, of finding a mirror you can't look away from. But I'm not afraid like that now. So — forgive me, Robbie. I know it's a lot to ask. But try. Try for me."

"Why?" the girl said.

"Because I'm in love with you."

She studied Jason's face carefully. Then she looked into his eyes. "Let me smell your breath," she said.

Jason huffed. "I'm not drunk. Honest."

"But — what's happened?" She touched his shoulders. "I don't —"

"Neither do I. It's stupid. *Believe* me, I honest to God do not know. Only that it's taken Rock Jason a long time to find Leroy O'Shea."

"Who?"

Jason smiled at how well the publicity department had kept his secret. "Guy I used to know. He's now captain of a spaceship. I ran into him on Jupiter."

"Rock Jason," the girl said, "you're nuts."

Jason laughed. "Could be. Could very well be. How about a psychoanalysis — over some straight ginger ale?" He rubbed a finger over the fresh scar on his left wrist.

The girl's summer dress billowed in the warm breeze.

"Please," Jason said.



Possibly we may never even conjecture, despite Sir Thomas Browne's optimism, "what song the Syrens sang"; but we all know how Odysseus protected his men against that unguessable lure by stopping their ears with wax. Even more impressive, however, if less widely known, is the only other defeat of those lethal songstresses recorded in mythology: Jason's ship Argo was fortunate enough to number among its many hero-voyagers that greatest of mortal musicians, Orpheus, who protected his fellow Argonauts from the Sirens in a manner possible only to him — he outsang them! Now that modern Orpheus, the roaming ballad-singer John, once more outsings evil, in what we think is one of the best yet of Mr. Wellman's compelling folktales . . . and defeats a supernatural threat by utilizing a strictly scientific principle.

The Little Black Train

by MANLY WADE WELLMAN

THERE IN THE High Fork country, with peaks saw-toothed into the sky and hollows diving away down and trees thicketed every which way, you'd think human foot had never stepped. Walking the trail between high pines, I touched my guitar's silver strings for company of the sound. But then a man squandered into sight around a bend — young-like, red-faced, baldy-headed. Gentlemen, he was as drunk as a hoot. I gave him good evening.

"Can you play that thing?" he gobbled at me and, second grab of his shaky hand, he got hold of my hickory shirt sleeve. "Come to the party, friend. Our fiddle band, last moment, they got scared out. We got just only a mouth-harp to play for us."

"What way was the fiddle band scared?" I asked him to tell.

"Party's at Miss Donie Carawan's," he said, without replying me. "Bobbycue pig and chicken, bar'l of good stump-hole whisky."

"Listen," I said, "ever hear tell of the man invited a stranger fiddler, he turned out to be Satan?"

"Shoo," he snickered, "Satan plays the fiddle, you play the guitar, I don't pay your guitar no worry. What's your name, friend?"

"John. What's yours?"

But he'd started up a narrow, grown-over, snaky-turny path you'd not

notice. I reckoned the party'd be at a house, where I could sleep the night that was coming, so I followed. He nearly fell back top of me, he was so stone drunk, but we got to a notch on the ridge, and the far side was a valley of trees, dark and secret looking. Going down, I began to hear loud laughing, talk. Finally we reached a yard at the bottom. There was a house there, and it looked like enough men and women to swing a primary election.

They whooped at us, so loud it rang my ears. The drunk man waved both his hands. "This here's my friend John," he bawled out, "and he's a-going to play us some music!"

They whooped louder at that, and easiest thing for me to do was start picking "Hell Broke Loose in Georgia"; and, gentlemen, right away they danced up a storm.

Wild-like, they whipped and whirled. Most of them were young folks dressed their best. One side, a great big man called the dance, but you couldn't much hear him, everybody laughed and hollered so loud. It got in my mind that children laugh and yell thataway, passing an old burying-ground where ghosts could be. It was the way they might be trying to dance down the nervouses; I jumped myself, between picks, when something started moaning beside me. But it was just a middling-old fellow with a thin face, playing his mouth-harp along with my guitar.

I looked to the house — it was new and wide and solid, with white-washed clay chinking between the squared logs of it. Through a dog-trot from front to back I saw clear down valley, west to where the sunball dropped red toward a far string of mountains. The valley-bottom's trees were spaced out with a kind of path or road, the whole length. The house windows began to light up as I played. Somebody was putting a match to lamps, against the night's fall.

End of the tune, everybody clapped me loud and long. "More! More!" they hollered, bunched among the yard trees, still fighting their nervouses.

"Friends," I managed to be heard, "let me make my manners to the one who's giving this party."

"Hi, Miss Doniel!" yelled out the drunk man. "Come meet John!"

From the house she walked through the crowded-around folks, stepping so proud she looked taller than she was. A right much stripy skirt swished to her high heels; but she hadn't such a much dress above, and none at all on her round arms and shoulders. The butter yellow of her hair must have come from a bottle, and the doll pink of her face from a box. She smiled up to me, and her perfume tingled my nose. Behind her followed that big dance-caller, with his dead black hair and wide teeth, and his heavy hands swinging like balance weights.

"Glad you came, John," she said, deep in her round throat.

I looked at her robin-egg blue eyes and her butter hair and her red mouth and her bare pink shoulders. She was maybe 35, maybe 40, maybe more and not looking it. "Proud to be here," I said, my politest. "Is this a birthday, Miss Donie Carawan?"

Folks fell quiet, swapping looks. An open cooking fire blazed up as the night sneaked in. Donie Carawan laughed deep.

"Birthday of a curse," and she widened her blue eyes. "End of the curse, too, I reckon. All tonight."

Some mouths came open, but didn't let words out. I reckoned that whatever had scared out the fiddle band was nothing usual. She held out a slim hand, with green-stoned rings on it.

"Come eat and drink, John," she bade me.

"Thanks," I said, for I hadn't eaten ary mouthful since crack of day.

Off she led me, her fingers pressing mine, her eye-corners watching me. The big dance-caller glittered a glare after us. He was purely jealous up that she'd made me so welcome.

Two dark-faced old men stood at an iron rack over a pit of coals, where lay two halves of a slow-cooking hog. One old man dipped a stick with a rag ball into a kettle of sauce and painted it over the brown roast meat. From a big pot of fat over yet another fire, an old woman forked hush-puppies into pans set ready on a plank table.

"Line up!" called Donie Carawan out, like a bugle. They lined up, talking and hollering again, smiles back on their faces. It was some way like dreams you have, folks carrying on loud and excited, and something bad coming on to happen.

Donie Carawan put her bare arm through my blue-sleeved elbow while an old man sliced chunks of barbecued hog on paper plates for us. The old woman forked on a hush-puppy and a big hobby of cole slaw. Eating, I wondered how they made the barbecue sauce — wondered, too, if all these folks really wanted to be here for what Donie Carawan called the birthday of a curse.

"John," she said, the way you'd think she read what I wondered, "don't they say a witch's curse can't work on a pure heart?"

"They say that," I agreed her, and she laughed her laugh. The big dance-caller and the skinny mouth-harp man looked up from their barbecue.

"An old witch cursed me for guilty twenty years back," said Donie Carawan. "The law said I was innocent. Who was right?"

"Don't know how to answer that," I had to say, and again she laughed, and bit into her hush-puppy.

"Look around you, John," she said. "This house is my house, and this

valley is my valley, and these folks are my friends, come to help me pleasure myself."

Again I reckoned, she's the only one here, that's pleased, maybe not even her.

"Law me," she laughed, "it's rough on a few folks, holding their breath all these years to see the curse light on me. Since it wouldn't light, I figured how to shoo it away." Her blue eyes looked up. "But what are you doing around High Fork, John?"

The dance-caller listened, and the thin-mouth-harp man. "Just passing through," I said. "Looking for songs. I heard about a High Fork song, something about a little black train."

Silence quick stretched all around, the way you'd think I'd been impolite. Yet again she broke the silence with a laugh.

"Why," she said, "I've known that song as long as I've known about the curse, near to. Want me to sing it for you?"

Folks were watching, and, "Please, ma'am," I asked her.

She sang, there in the yellow lamplight and red firelight, among the shady-shadowy trees and the mountain dark, without any slice of moon overhead. Her voice was a good voice. I put down my plate and, a line or two along, I made out to follow her with the guitar.

*I heard a voice of warning,
A message from on high,
"Go put your house in order
For thou shalt surely die.
Tell all your friends a long farewell
And get your business right —
The little black train is rolling in
To call for you tonight."*

"Miss Donie, that's a tuneful thing," I said. "Sounds right like a train rolling."

"My voice isn't high enough to sound the whistle part," she smiled at me, red-mouthed.

"I might could do that," said the mouth-harp man, coming close and speaking soft. And folks were craning at us, looking sick, embarrassed, purely distasted. I began to wonder why I shouldn't have given a name to that black train song.

But then rose up a big holler near the house, where a barrel was set. The drunk man that'd fetched me was yelling mad at another man near-about as drunk, and they were trying to grab a drinking gourd from each other.

Two-three other men on each side hoorawed them on to squabble more.

"Jeth!" called Donie Carawan to the big dance-caller. "Let's stop that before they spill the whisky, Jeth."

Jeth and she headed for the bunch by the barrel, and everybody else was crowding to watch.

"John," said a quiet somebody — the mouth-harp man, with firelight showing lines in his thin face, salty gray in his hair. "What you really doing here?"

"Watching," I said, while big Jeth hauled those two drunk men off from each other, and Donie Carawan scolded them. "And listening," I said. "Wanting to know what way the black train song fits in with this party and the tale about the curse. You know about it?"

"I know," he said.

We carried our food out of the firelight. Folks were crowding to the barrel, laughing and yelling.

"Donie Carawan was to marry Trevis Jones," the mouth-harp man told me. "He owned the High Fork Railroad to freight the timber from this valley. He'd a lavish of money, is how he got to marry her. But," and he swallowed hard, "another young fellow loved her. Cobb Richardson, who ran Trevis Jones's train on the High Fork Railroad. And he killed Trevis Jones."

"For love?" I asked.

"Folks reckoned that Donie Carawan decided against Trevis and love-talked Cobb into the killing; for Trevis had made a will and heired her all his money and property — the railroad and all. But Cobb made confession. Said Donie had no part in it. The law let her go, and killed Cobb in the electric chair, down at the state capital."

"I declare to never," I said.

"Fact. And Cobb's mother — Mrs. Amanda Richardson — spoke the curse."

"Oh," I said, "is she the witch that —"

"She was no witch," he broke me off, "but she cursed Donie Carawan, that the train that Cobb had engine-drove, and Trevis had heired to her, would be her death and destruction. Donie laughed. You've heard her laugh. And folks started the song, the black train song."

"Who made it?" I asked him.

"Reckon I did," he said, looking long at me. He waited to let me feel that news. Then he said, "Maybe it was the song decided Donie Carawan to deal with the Hickory River Railroad, agreeing for an income of money not to run the High Fork train no more."

I'd finished my barbecue. I could have had more, but I didn't feel like it.

"I see," I told him. "She reckoned that if no train ran on the High Fork tracks, it couldn't be her death and destruction."

He and I put our paper plates on one of the fires. I didn't look at the other folks, but it seemed to me they were quieting their laughing and talking as the night got darker.

"Only thing is," the mouth-harp man went on, "folks say the train runs on that track. Or it did. A black train runs some nights at midnight, they say, and when it runs a sinner dies."

"You ever see it run?"

"No, John, but I've sure God heard it. And only Donie Carawan laughs about it."

She laughed right then, joking the two men who'd feathered up to fight. Ary man's neck craned at her, and women looked the way you'd figure they didn't relish that. My neck craned some, itself.

"Twenty years back, the height of her bloom," said the mouth-harp man, "law me, you'd never call to look at anything else."

"What does she mean, no more curse?"

"She made another deal, John. She sold off the rails of the High Fork Road, that's stood idle for twenty years. Today the last of them was torn up and carried off. Meanwhile, she's had this house built, across where the right of way used to be. Looky yonder, through the dog-trot. That's where the road ran."

So it was the old road bed made that dark dip amongst the trees. Just now it didn't look so wide a dip.

"No rails," he said. "She figures no black train at midnight. Folks came at her invite — some because they rent her land, some because they owe her money, and some — men folks — because they'll do ary thing she bids them."

"And she never married?" I asked.

"If she done that, she'd lose the money and land she heired from Trevis Jones. It was in his will. She just takes men without marrying, one and then another. I've known men kill themselves because she'd put her heart back in her pocket on them. Lately, it's been big Jeth. She acts tonight like pick herself a new beau lover."

She walked back through the lamplight and firelight. "John," she said, "these folks want to dance again."

What I played them was "Many Thousands Gone," with the mouth-harp to help, and they danced and stomped the way you'd think it was a many thousands dancing. In its thick, Donie Carawan promenaded left and right and do-si-doed with a fair-haired young fellow, and Jeth the dance-caller looked pickle-sour. When I'd done, Donie Carawan came swishing back.

"Let the mouth-harp play," she said, "and dance with me."

"Can't dance no shakes," I told her. "Just now, I'd relish to practice the black train song."

Her blue eyes crinkled. "All right. Play, and I'll sing."

She did. The mouth-harp man blew whistle-moanings to my guitar, and folks listened, goggling like frogs.

*A bold young man kept mocking,
Cared not for the warning word,
When the wild and lonely whistle
Of the little black train he heard.
"Have mercy, Lord, forgive me!
I'm cut down in my sin!
O death, will you not spare me?"
But the little black train rolled in.*

When she'd sung that much, Donie Carawan laughed like before, deep and bantering. Jeth the dance-caller made a funny sound in his bull throat.

"What I don't figure," he said, "was how you all made the train sound like coming in, closer and closer."

"Just by changing the music," I said, "Changing the pitch."

"Fact," said the mouth-harp man. "I played the change with him."

A woman laughed, nervous. "Now I think, that's true. A train whistle sounds higher and higher while it comes up to you. Then it passes and goes off, sounding lower and lower."

"But I didn't hear the train go away in the song," allowed a man beside her. "It just kept coming." He shrugged, maybe he shivered.

"Donie," said the woman, "reckon I'll go along."

"Stay on, Lettie," began Donie Carawan, telling her instead of asking.

"Got a right much walking to do, and no moon," said the woman. "Reuben, you come, too."

She left. The man looked back just once at Donie Carawan, and followed. Another couple, and then another, went with them from the firelight. Maybe more would have gone, but Donie Carawan snorted, like a horse, to stop them.

"Let's drink," she said. "Plenty for all, now those folks I reckoned to be my friends are gone."

Maybe two-three others faded away, between there and the barrel. Donie Carawan dipped herself a drink, watching me over the gourd's edge. Then she dipped more and held it out.

"You drink after a lady," she whispered, "and get a kiss."

I drank. It was good stump-hole whisky. "Tasty," I said.

"The kiss?" she laughed. But the dance-caller didn't laugh, or either the mouth-harp man, or either me.

"Let's dance," said Donie Carawan, and I picked "Sourwood Mountain" and the mouth-harp moaned.

The dancers had got to be few, just in a short while. But the trees they danced through looked bigger, and more of them. It minded me of how I'd heard, when I was a chap, about day-trees and night-trees, they weren't the same things at all; and the night-trees can crowd all round a house they don't like, pound the shingles off the roof, bust in the window glass and the door panels; and that's the sort of night you'd better never set your foot outside. . . .

Not so much clapping at the end of "Sourwood Mountain." Not such a holler of "More!" Folks went to take another drink at the barrel, but the mouth-harp man held me back.

"Tell me," he said, "about that business. The noise sounding higher when the train comes close."

"It was explained out to me by a man I know, place in Tennessee called Oak Ridge," I said. "It's about what they call sound waves, and some way it works with light, too. Don't rightly catch on how, but they can measure how far it is to the stars thataway."

He thought, frowning. "Something like what's called radar?"

I shook my head. "No, no machinery to it. Just what they name a principle. Fellow named Doppler — Christian Doppler, a foreigner — got it up."

"His name was Christian," the mouth-harp man repeated me. "Then I reckon it's no witch stuff."

"Why you worrying it?" I asked him.

"I watched through the dog-trot while we were playing the black train song, changing pitch; making it sound like coming near," he said. "Looky yonder, see for yourself."

I looked. There was a streaky shine down the valley. Two streaky shines, though nary moon. I saw what he meant — it looked like those pulled-up rails were still there, where they hadn't been before.

"That second verse Miss Donie sang," I said. "Was it about —"

"Yes," he said before I'd finished. "That was the verse about Cobb Richardson. How he prayed for God's forgiveness, night before he died."

Donie Carawan came and poked her hand under my arm. I could tell that good-strong liquor was feeling its way around her insides. She laughed at almost nothing whatever. "You're not leaving, anyway," she smiled at me.

"Don't have any place special to go," I said.

She upped on her pointed toes. "Stay here tonight," she said in my ear. "The rest of them will be gone by midnight."

"You invite men like that?" I said, looking into her blue eyes. "When you don't know them?"

"I know men well enough," she said. "Knowing men keeps a woman young." Her finger touched my guitar where it hung behind my shoulder, and the strings whispered a reply. "Sing me something, John."

"I still want to learn the black train song."

"I've sung you both verses," she said.

"Then," I told her, "I'll sing a verse I've just made up inside my head." I looked at the mouth-harp man. "Help me with this."

Together we played, raising pitch gradually, and I sang the new verse I'd made, with my eyes on Donie Carawan.

*Go tell that laughing lady
All filled with worldly pride,
The little black train is coming,
Get ready to take a ride.
With a little black coach and engine
And a little black baggage car,
The words and deeds she has said and done
Must roll to the judgment bar.*

When I was through, I looked up at those who'd stayed. They weren't more than half a dozen now, bunched up together like cows in a storm; all but Big Jeth, standing to one side with eyes stabbing at me, and Donie Carawan, leaning tired-like against a tree with hanging branches.

"Jeth," she said, "stomp his guitar to pieces."

I switched the carrying cord off my neck and held the guitar at my side. "Don't try such a thing, Jeth," I warned him.

His big square teeth grinned, with dark spaces between them. He looked twice as wide as me.

"I'll stomp you and your guitar both," he said.

I put the guitar on the ground, glad I'd had but the one drink. Jeth ran and stooped for it, and I put my fist hard under his ear. He hopped two steps away to keep his feet.

Shouldn't anybody name me what he did then, and I hit him twice more, harder yet. His nose flattened out under my knuckles and when he pulled back away, blood trickled.

The mouth-harp man grabbed up my guitar. "This here'll be a square

fight!" he yelled, louder than he'd spoken so far. "Ain't a fair one, seeing Jeth's so big, but it'll be square! Just them two in it, and no more!"

"I'll settle you later," Jeth promised him, mean.

"Settle me first," I said, and got betwixt them.

Jeth ran at me. I stepped sidewise and got him under the ear again as he went shammocking past. He turned, and I dug my fist right into his belly-middle, to stir up all that stump-hole whisky he'd been drinking, then the other fist under the ear yet once more, then on the chin and the mouth, under the ear, on the broken nose — ten licks like that, as fast and hard as I could fetch them in, and eighth or ninth he went slack, and the tenth he just fell flat and loose, like a coat from a nail. I stood waiting, but he didn't move.

"Gentlemen," said the drunk man who'd fetched me, "looky yonder at Jeth laying there! Never figured to see the day! Maybe that stranger-man calls himself John is Satan, after all!"

Donie Carawan walked across, slow, and gouged Jeth's ribs with the pointy toe of her high-heeled shoe. "Get up," she bade him.

He grunted and mumbled and opened his eyes. Then he got up, joint by joint, careful and sore, like a sick bull. He tried to stop the blood from his nose with the back of his big hand. Donie Carawan looked at him and then she looked at me.

"Get out of here, Jeth," she ordered him. "Off my place."

He went, cripply-like, with his knees bent and his hands swinging and his back humped, the way you'd think he carried something heavy.

The drunk man hiccupped. "I reckon to go, too," he said, maybe just to himself.

"Then go!" Donie Carawan yelled at him. "Everybody can go, right now, this minute! I thought you were my friends — now I see I don't have a friend among the whole bunch! Hurry up, get going! Everybody!"

Hands on hips, she blared it out. Folks moved off through the trees, a sight faster than Jeth had gone. But I stood where I was. The mouth-harp man gave me back my guitar, and I touched a chord of its strings. Donie Carawan spun around like on a swivel to set her blue eyes on me.

"You stayed," she said, the way she thought there was something funny about it.

"It's not midnight yet," I told her.

"But near to," added the mouth-harp man. "Just a few minutes off. And it's at midnight the little black train runs."

She lifted her round bare shoulders. She made to laugh again, but didn't.

"That's all gone. If it ever was true, it's not true any more. The rails were taken up —"

"Looky yonder through the dog-trot," the mouth-harp man broke in. "See the two rails in place, streaking along the valley."

Again she swung around and she looked, and seemed to me she swayed in the light of the dying fires. She could see those streaky rails, all right.

"And listen," said the mouth-harp man. "Don't you all hear something?" I heard it, and so did Donie Carawan, for she flinched. It was a wild and lonely whistle, soft but plain, far down valley.

"Are you doing that, John?" she squealed at me, in a voice gone all of a sudden high and weak and old. Then she ran at the house and into the dog-trot, staring down along what looked like railroad track.

I followed her, and the mouth-harp man followed me. Inside the dog-trot was a floor of dirt, stomped hard as brick. Donie Carawan looked back at us. Lamplight came through a window, to make her face look bright pale, with the painted red of the mouth gone almost black against it.

"John," she said, "you're playing a trick, making it sound like —"

"Not me," I swore to her.

It whistled again, *wooooooeeeeee!* And I, too, looked along the two rails, shining plain as plain in the dark moonless night, to curve off around a valley-bend. A second later, the engine itself sounded, *chukchukchukchuk*, and the whistle, *wooooooeeeeee!*

"Miss Donie," I said, close behind her, "you'd better go away."

I pushed her gently.

"No!" She lifted her fists, and I saw cordy lines on their backs — they weren't a young woman's fists. "This is my house and my land, and it's my railroad!"

"But —" I started to say.

"If it comes here," she broke me off, "where can I run to from it?"

The mouth-harp man tugged my sleeve. "I'm going," he said. "You and me raised the pitch and brought the black train. Thought I could stay, watch it and glory in it. But I'm not man enough."

Going, he blew a whistle-moan on his mouth-harp, and the other whistle blew back an answer, louder and nearer.

And higher in the pitch.

"That's a real train coming," I told Donie Carawan, but she shook her yellow head.

"No," she said, dead-like. "It's coming, but it's no real train. It's heading right to this dog-trot. Look, John. On the ground."

Rails looked to run there, right through the dog-trot like through a tunnel. Maybe it was some peculiar way of the light. They lay close together, like narrow-gauge rails. I didn't feel like touching them with my toe to make sure of them, but I saw them. Holding my guitar under one arm, I

put out my other hand to take Donie Carawan's elbow. "We'd better go," I said again.

"I can't!"

She said it loud and sharp and purely scared. And taking hold of her arm was like grabbing the rail of a fence, it was so stiff and unmoving.

"I own this land," she was saying. "I can't leave it."

I tried to pick her up, and that couldn't be done. You'd have thought she'd grown to the ground inside that dog-trot, spang between what looked like the rails, the way you'd figure roots had come from her pointy toes and high heels. Out yonder, where the trackmarks curved off, the sound rose louder, higher, *chukchukchukchuk — wooooooeeeeee!* And light was coming from round the curve, like a headlight maybe, only it had some blue to its yellow.

The sound of the coming engine made the notes of the song in my head:

*Go put your house in order
For thou shalt sure die —*

Getting higher, getting higher, changing pitch as it came close and closer —

I don't know when I began picking the tune on my guitar, but I was playing as I stood there next to Donie Carawan. She couldn't flee. She was rooted there, or frozen there, and the train was going to come in sight in just a second.

The mouth-harp man credited us, him and me, with bringing it, by that pitch-changing. And, whatever anybody deserved, wasn't for me to bring their servings on them. I thought things like that. Also:

Christian Doppler was the name of the fellow who'd thought out the why and wherefore of how pitch makes the sound closeness. Like what the mouth-harp man said, his name showed it wasn't witch stuff. An honest man could try . . .

I slid my fingers back up the guitar-neck, little by little, as I picked the music, and the pitch sneaked down.

"Here it comes, John," whimpered Donie Carawan, standing solid as a stump.

"No," I said. "It's going — listen!"

I played so soft you could pick up the train-noise with your ear. And the pitch was dropping, like with my guitar, and the whistle sounded *wooooo-eeeeee!* Lower it sounded.

"The light — dimmer —" she said. "Oh, if I could have the chance to live different —"

She moaned and swayed.
Words came for me to sing as I picked.

*Oh, see her standing helpless,
Oh, hear her shedding tears.
She's counting these last moments
As once she counted years.
She'd turn from proud and wicked ways,
She'd leave her sin, O Lord!
If the little black train would just back up
And not take her aboard.*

For she was weeping, all right. I heard her breath catch and strangle and shake her body, the way you'd look for it to tear her ribs loose from her backbone. I picked on, strummed on, lower and lower.

Just for once, I thought I could glimpse what might have come at us.

It was little, all right, and black under that funny cold-blue light it carried. And the cars weren't any bigger than coffins, and some way the shape of coffins. Or maybe I just sort of imagined that, dreamed it up while I stood there. Anyway, the light grew dim, and the *chukchukchukchuk* went softer and lower, and you'd guess the train was backing off, out of hearing.

I stopped my hand on the silver strings. We stood there in a silence like what there must be in some lifeless, airless place like on the moon.

Then Donie Carawan gave out one big, broken sob, and I caught her with my free arm as she fell.

She was soft enough then. All the tight was gone from her. She lifted one weak, round, bare arm around my neck, and her tears wet my hickory shirt.

"You saved me, John," she kept saying. "You turned the curse away."

"Reckon I did," I said, though that sounded like bragging. I looked down at the rails, and they weren't there, in the dog-trot or beyond. Just the dark of the valley. The cooking fires had burned out, and the lamps in the house were low.

Her arm tightened around my neck. "Come in," she said. "Come in, John. You and me, alone in there."

"It's time for me to head off away," I said.

Her arm dropped from me. "What's the matter? Don't you like me?" she asked.

I didn't even answer that one, she sounded so pitiful. "Miss Donie," I said, "you told a true thing. I turned the curse from you. It hadn't died. You can't kill it by laughing at it, or saying there aren't such things, or pulling up rails. If it held off tonight, it might come back."

"Oh!" She half raised her arms to me again, then put them down.

"What must I do?" she begged me.

"Stop being a sinner."

Her blue eyes got round in her pale face.

"You want me to live," she said, hopeful.

"It's better for you to live. You told me that folks owe you money, rent land from you and such. How'd they get along if you got carried off?"

She could see what I meant, maybe the first time in her life.

"You'd be gone," I minded her, "but the folks would stay behind, needing your help. Well, you're still here, Miss Donie. Try to help the folks. There's a thousand ways to do it. I don't have to name them to you. And you act right; you won't be so apt to hear that whistle at midnight."

I started out of the dog-trot.

"John!" My name sounded like a wail in her mouth.

"Stay here tonight, John," she begged me. "Stay with me! I want you here, John, I need you here!"

"No, you don't need me, Miss Donie," I said. "You've got a right much of thinking and planning to do. Around about the up of sun, you'll have done enough, maybe, to start living different from this on."

She started to cry. As I walked away I noticed how, farther I got, lower her voice-pitch sounded.

I sort of stumbled on the trail. The mouth-harp man sat on a chopped-down old log.

"I listened, John," he said. "Think you done right?"

"Did the closest I could to right. Maybe the black train was bound to roll, on orders from whatever station it starts from; maybe it was you and me, raising the pitch the way we did, brought it here tonight."

"I left when I did, dreading that thought," he nodded.

"The same thought made me back it out again," I said. "Anyway, I kind of glimmer the idea you all can look for a new Donie Carawan hereabouts, from now forward."

He got up and turned to go up trail. "I never said who I was."

"No, sir," I agreed him. "And I never asked."

"I'm Cobb Richardson's brother. Wyatt Richardson. Dying, my mother swore me to even things with Donie Carawan for what happened to Cobb. Doubt if she meant this sort of turn-out, but I reckon it would suit her fine."

We walked into the dark together.

"Come stay at my house tonight, John," he made the offer. "Ain't much there, but you're welcome to what there is."

"Thank you kindly," I said. "I'd be proud to stay."

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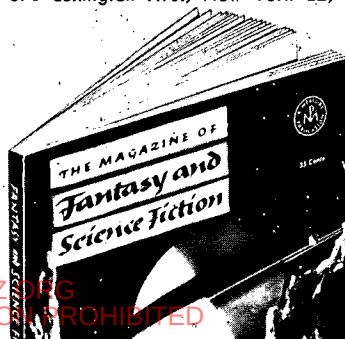
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